A LION AMONG LADIES

by

GEORGE BEARDMORE

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MACDONALD : LONDON

George Beardmore has also written

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FAR CRY

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GOING INTO THE COUNTRY

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First published 1949

Published by
Macdonald & Co. (Publishers) Ltd.,
43 *Ludgate Hill*
Made and printed in Great Britain by
Purnell and Sons, Ltd., Paulton
(Somerset) and London

BOTTOM. Masters, you ought to consider with yourselves: to bring in,—God shield us!—a lion among ladies, is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wildfowl than your lion living; and we ought to look to't.

SNOUT. Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion.

BOTTOM. Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck; and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or to the same defect,—"Ladies,"—or "Fair Ladies,"—"I would wish you,"—or, "I would request you,"—or, "I would entreat you,—not to fear, not to tremble: my life for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life: no, I am no such thing: I am a man as other men are:" and there indeed let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner.

—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

I

I WAS BORN in Trentham, Staffordshire, in a large stone house overlooking a deer park, which in my infancy became a playground for the Potteries. I mention this deer park with affection because it soothed me in my childish sorrows like a nurse.

My mother was the secretary of the League for Penal Reform. It is sufficient description. I had two sisters older than myself, both of whom wished to be masculine. Ethel, who was ten years older than I, almost succeeded, but Gwen, who was eight years older, was prevented by prettiness. Both copied mother's ideals, championed the freedom of their sex, and ridiculed the superiority of mine.

The wonder is how feminine those girls remained. Gwen was not above using lipstick, while Ethel, who taught ballet and classical dancing and had the horse-face that normally goes with the profession, had also been given a very female figure.

Soon after I was born, my father had had the sense to run away, so that I became all the more welcome. I was brought up to a régime of cold baths, open windows, skipping before breakfast, and an absence of such comforts as hot-water bottles.

My sisters' rooms were forbidden to me, even for borrowing a book. But they had every right to enter mine, at any hour. Gwen was clinically interested in a birth-mark of freckles I possess, beneath the left nipple, which, she said, with all the authority of a chemist's assistant, was the work of lice. Ethel was known to enter my room at 5 a.m., fling open the window and take away the bolster, saying that my head was too high.

My earliest recollection of them is of Gwen complaining to Ethel that she, too, must have the privilege of smacking me. I tried to make a collection of birds' eggs, but Ethel had doubts about the ethics of egg-collecting. When I tried to collect china models, Gwen thought that two or three would look best on her dressing-table.

One result of living in a household of women was that I did not understand the purpose and apparatus of sex until I was past twenty. No one at home troubled to teach me. At school a boy called Shemilt gave me what I see now was a very fair version of the sexual function, one lunch-hour behind the bicycle-shed. I made the mistake of not believing him. I thought that Shemilt had a filthy imagination. In this I was more to be praised than blamed, for I still think that if propagation were differently managed, and the phenomenon as it now is were presented as a new idea, any reasonably intelligent being would scoff at it.

Then, in my flowering teens, I was revolted. It seemed incredible to me that the modest ladies of my acquaintance could ever lend themselves to an act so gross, still less the exquisite creatures of the pre-Raphaelite paintings then filling my imagination, or royalty, or my highly sensitive sisters.

The part of me that longed to believe Shemilt I pushed into hiding, as I had pushed everything that must be kept from my family, and I wandered into my twenties trying consciously to work things out for myself, conceding that Shemilt may have distorted the truth with the object of horrifying me, but never, until experience removed all doubt, discovering how.

In the meantime I was fascinated by one girl or another. My inward questionings were in no way connected with the girl I used to meet every evening in the village, fetching stout for her grandmother. I never got further than holding the middle finger of her left hand. The following year another girl brought me to a stop in her car on the verge of a bluebell wood, and was disappointed in the bushel of bluebells we gathered. Yet a third girl declared: "What I love about you, Harry, is that you're so *safe*."

I may be excused on the grounds of ignorance, but the memory of those episodes fills me with shame.

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My childhood has, however, given me candour. Anyone else would say to himself: "They'll think me too much of an ass." I have been made to look an ass too many times for me to care. This is a tale of ridicule, a restatement of the business of love in keeping with the spirit of the age. I tell it responsibly, as a duty. But I confess that anyone without my upbringing would have kept quiet.

My escape from the tyranny of my sisters came when I was set down, a complete stranger, in London at the Kensington Academy of Music. It is always nice when such a move takes place, because one has the illusion of throwing off an old and dirty reputation in exchange for a new and clean one.

I owed the move to my Uncle Crawshay, an elderly bachelor who sometimes took my father's place in advising Mother on finance and household management. Needless to say, he was her elder brother.

His appearance was striking, head thrust forward as though to disown a meagre body, eyebrows like butterflies, a long thin nose, a straggling yellow beard stained with nicotine in a ragged circle round the mouth, and the clairvoyant gaze of goats and prophets. This monkish appearance found a parallel in a portrait of St. John the Baptist in the window of the chapel at the prep. school where he was assistant head.

English and Music were his subjects, but his reputation depended upon my grandfather, Sir Richard Wilshaw, the eminent Victorian conductor. Sir Richard was also, of course, the composer of the Oratorio *Agony in the Garden*, and the refrain of his anthem "Zion's Towers" has recently been given new life as the signature tune of a well-known dance band. No member of my family has failed to regret that the *Agony* was dedicated to Crawshay Kenyon, for it gave him leave to write a biography of the composer, besides various prefaces, paragraphs in music journals and chapters in anthologies. He addressed schools and Methodist congregations on the same subject, and no book on Victorian composers was complete without an acknowledgment to Crawshay Kenyon, of Barlaston. He was, in short, the type of critic who lives on another's reputation, as the tick-bird lives on the back of the crocodile.

When not engaged in feuds with mother, he paid us formal visits in a dog-cart drawn by a sad-faced pony that constantly broke wind.

Two such visits affected me closely.

From childhood my refuge had been the deer-park. From ten upwards I had found solace in a school exercise book in which I wrote down the poems and tunes that there occurred to me. Their beauty lay in secrecy. One evening I was practising one of the tunes on an upright in the lumber-room, unaware that Uncle Crawshay was in the house, when I found them all behind me, Mother, sisters and Uncle.

I had no time to slip the book into the piano, and in a moment they had taken possession of it.

Mother told me next day that Uncle Crawshay had examined the book, was pleased with what he had found, and prophesied for me a brilliant future. I could not have been more depressed if I had been promised a flogging. When my book had been returned to me, scored with Uncle Crawshay's red pencil, I tore it into shreds and put the shreds into different fires.

The discovery had one good result, for I was sent to study harmony and counterpoint under Professor H—— in Stoke, which took me away from home. This Professor H—— was a well-known character in the Stoke of those days, walking the streets in a long cloak such as Ruskin wore, apparently not seeing the shawled wives and colliers' lads among whom he moved. He owed, and was owed, money on all sides. He had studied at Leipzig, Rome and Vienna, but teaching and practising in the music-loving Potteries had impoverished him.

His enthusiasm for music, which implied surprise that other enthusiasms existed, could not help but make me respond. After two years I was writing freely again, and without shyness showing him what I had written.

Uncle Crawshay's second incursion followed a lecture Professor H—— delivered to the graduates of Burslem School of Art. In this he said that, in general, artists, authors and composers weren't necessarily great because they were local, and that, in particular, Sir Richard Wilshaw owed more to Carl Reinecke than to his having been born in Hope Street, Hanley.

Uncle Crawshay examined me in my studies, made me show him my score-book, and questioned me about Professor H—— like an Inquisitor who is horrified and yet rewarded by the heresies he extorts.

The outcome was given me by my mother after the pony had gone puffing home with him. I was to leave Professor H—— and go to an academy in London. Her own income would not allow of this, but Uncle Crawshay had consented to allow me £250 a year for three years, repayable when my earnings allowed, but in any case not later than ten years hence, plus four per cent per annum.

True to life, I didn't recognize my salvation when it was offered, and protested. For one thing, I liked Professor H——. For another, I was involved at the time with the girl who loved me for being safe. Deeper than these was the recognition that I was not the genius my family believed me.

Ten years previously the distress of mind that had driven me to the pheasant-preserves overlooking the Black Pool had brought with it a mysterious orchestra whose strains I had tried to intercept as they swept through me. Later, it came only with conscious wooing between slipping into bed and sleep. As I grew to manhood I lost the trick of it, didn't hear the orchestra for months, even scoffed at it. Then I became ill, lost my appendix and was sent to a farm at Beech to recuperate. There the orchestra returned to me, not only at nightfall, but loudly, under the open sky. After that, I never heard the voice again, except once, when I first possessed Charlotte Rhode.

Apart from this private orchestra I had nothing except a conventional taste in music and the ability to play one or two instruments. To describe me as a composer was absurd. But like all unimaginative people, my family believed that once a thing was established it always remained so. Uncle Crawshay had assured them that I was a composer of talent, if not of genius; therefore I was always a composer of talent, if not of genius. That I never became one was due to native perversity.

I went to London and was taken in by the Kensington Academy of Music, then under the direction of Dr. Lloyd Webster. I took lodging in Marcus Street, off the Bayswater Road, in a boarding-house run by two maiden ladies. Notwithstanding that it had been approved by Uncle Crawshay himself, the ladies sometimes showed an interest in me from which I was defended, as I see now, only by ignorance.

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Months passed before I realized that my sister's domination was ended and that I was free to join the company of those jolly girls who pinned notices to my back, and the boys who spent their week-ends punting to Maidenhead.

A greater influence than theirs was, however, that of my father. My earliest recollection is not of some triviality like a putting on my first breeches but of my father packing his case and swearing that he would never return. Nor did he. During boyhood and adolescence I was constantly being reminded what a monster of ingratitude, faithlessness, niggardliness, etc. etc., he was. When I sought him out in his second-floor room in the Grand Hotel, Southampton Row, I found the description inaccurate. He was the most tolerant fellow I had ever met, and he quickly became a father to me. His image is with me now, and now, too, I weep that he is no more.

Which, of course was all that my mother had most feared.

A less pronounced influence was that of a fellow-student called Will Holland. He was then moving rapidly into the heaviness of build that was to be his for a score or more of years, with a hanging head and absence of gesture or change in expression. No doubt he was often amused, but he never showed it. Although raw from the provinces, I was not so out of place as Holland, who was London-born. I have the clearest image of him standing stiffly against a radiator in the corridor with a horde of boys and girls rushing past him, not daring to ask one of them which way to go.

This would not have mattered if he had had any aptitude, but none of us could discern any. He was entered for the Composers' examination in harmony and counterpoint, which seemed to us the height of humour, for his inventions (it is the best word) perfectly represented his own morose and difficult character.

All the same, I would sometimes have the feeling that some incomprehensible struggle was taking place inside him that was expressed only in his hard, blazing blue eyes.

More puzzling was why our director, with his notorious temper, should not only have admitted Holland, but taken pains with him. The doctor's interest was usually manifested through his eldest daughter, Marjorie, who was taking Performers' in singing, a big, high-spirited girl, who strongly attracted me.

During the summer holidays Marjorie used to invite some twenty fellow-pupils to join the Websters in their bungalow on the Kentish coast, near Tankerton. It was a very large bungalow, and guests were otherwise installed in belltents and an army hut, which also served as a concert-hall. Informal discussions on music were taking place at all hours of the day, and there was generally a piano going, or a gramophone, apart from bathing-parties and a lot of tomfoolery on moonlight nights. It was, in short, the greatest fun imaginable.

We were surprised during my first summer to find Holland among us. We were embarrassed, too, wondering who would be bold enough to make him an apple-pie bed, and what contribution he would offer to the controversy about Bartók's *Kossuth* symphony then occupying us.

But we need not have worried, for he joined with us very little and instead spent most of his time with Mrs. Webster. There was already a large brood of Webster girls, whom the doctor referred to as his little organ-pipes, and Mrs. Webster was carrying another, who must undoubtedly be a girl, too. One used to walk in at the french windows and find Holland and Mrs. Webster conversing in a corner. He had found someone to whom he could talk without blushing. Or one might see Holland helping Mrs. Webster over the loose sand of the foreshore, dressed in a robe of white wool embroidered with blue dragon-flies, her hair screwed up into a bun, looking like a mandarin.

Prejudices faded before Mrs. Webster like frost before the spring sun. She was Lloyd Webster's second wife, and in fact Marjorie was not her daughter but that of her predecessor. It was well known that without the second Mrs. Webster's tact our irascible director would not have attained his present fame.

We returned to our classes with a new respect for Holland, feeling that there was some mystery about him from which we were excluded. He was known to be under Marjorie's wing and to visit the Websters from time to time. We were prepared to admit him and even to be proud of him, but our new regard was ruined three months later when he appeared at the New Year Arts Ball in his day clothes.

This would not have mattered very much, for we recognized poverty when we saw it, and some of us even boasted of knowing it. Moreover, he apologized by saying that he had never been to such a function before, and had assumed that to wear a domino was enough. But we were young and thoughtless enough to take his domino seriously—with his blue chin and bruiser's torso, it made him very like a burglar—and we gave him first prize.

This was not enough. He refused to see our cruelty and accepted the gift, though it was a heavy silver cigarette-box and he did not in those days smoke, saying: "But I really came in my ordinary things, you know."

From the beginning, Holland had attracted me against my will. On that occasion he attached himself to me and asked me to go home with him. I did not then know that he never did anything without motive. I was irritated and yet touched. I had hoped to continue the party with my friends until four or five in the morning at a Corner House, but found myself forced to go with him, to some kennel or other on the third floor of a turning off Margaret Street, over an Italian café. Monday's collar was hanging on a line over the gas stove, and the iron was standing on the scorched back of a bread-board, exactly as he had left it after pressing his confounded suit.

He insisted on making coffee, and with his back to me, while selecting one of a neat array of tins, he said: "I was once pinched for housebreaking, you know."

No reply exists to such a confession. . . . I sat at the narrow table feeling tired and ill. He turned round and moved the silver cigarette-box an inch or two so as to make room for a biscuit tin. Observing my expression, he added: "You knew that, didn't you?"

I protested: "Will, upon my honour——!"

"It doesn't matter. I was only fifteen. I was sent to a home, a sort of Borstal. The probation officer said I was in need of care. Like all juvenile cases, it was settled before the court sat."

The coffee was made. I said : " I suppose you told Dr. Webster ? "

" Why not ? "

He seemed to expect a reply, and I said : " That accounts for his interest in you. It was always a mystery."

" No. He thinks I've got a future."

I scoffed : " You ! "

" I've done all sorts of things to give myself this eighteen months' schooling." He shrugged his shoulders. " Only to find I'm useless when put into competition."

I could make nothing of this. While he was still in this novel mood for talking, I ventured to ask : " I say, were you—a professional ? "

He even laughed. " I was one of a gang of louts at Dalston, smashing windows with bricks. Having smashed the windows, someone suggested climbing inside. We found ourselves in a pawnbroker's storeroom, among rows of greasy East End suits. Among them were the silks and turbans of a family of Sikhs who made their living in the neighbourhood by machining scarves and neckties. We were trying on the turbans when the police discovered us."

" How perfectly beastly ! "

He threw me a half-humorous glance. " I played the organ and taught the choir. I was happy enough."

I could not bear to look at the cigarette-box, but put a hand on it and said : " Let me chuck this damned thing into the canal."

" Take your hand off it. I can get four-ten for it at Jay's."

Late in January he took me on one side to tell me that he was leaving. I was not surprised. He did not give as his reason that he felt out of place or was making no progress, but said simply : " This place has nothing to teach me."

Three months later I, too, left the academy. I had known for some time that I was wasting time there. I may also have been influenced by the fact that I was building up debt to Uncle Crawshay. One day on an Inner Circle train I found a copy of the *Watford Weekly* containing an advertisement for an assistant to the secretary of Smith & Snelson's, a mail-order firm. I applied and was given the position in the teeth of seventeen competitors, chiefly because I was willing to take ten shillings less than any other. I had known, of course, that someone would make up my income to a reasonable figure, and, of course, no one did.

So as not to compromise my father, I told him after I had taken the position. He offered no comment. He was probably glad, but he tried to go through life without either praising or blaming.

Each of my sisters sent me a letter filled with bitter reproaches. In a dignified note, Uncle Crawshay reminded me that, whatever stupidity I had committed or would commit, I was engaged to pay him £340 when my earnings allowed, but in any case not later than eight years hence, plus four per cent per annum. Mother never referred to my shattering of her hopes, but continued to send me pocket-money, short notes written on Penal Reform paper and occasional parcels of food and home-knitted clothing. I learned later that soon after my apostasy she had risen from the tea-table with tears in her eyes, saying: "After all, he's the only son I shall ever have."

About a week after leaving, I visited the Websters in their large house on the southern flanks of Harrow Hill. I had really wanted to say good-bye to Marjorie, but she was out. Mrs. Webster questioned me about Holland, his reason for leaving and where he had gone, but I had nothing to add to the foregoing.

She said: "The worst of artists is that they won't take advice."

"Do you call him an artist?"

She made no answer except to throw me a quizzical glance.

Soon after this Dr. Webster resigned his directorship, and the academy sank to its present level as the recognized training-ground of B.B.C. personnel.

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I had been with Smith & Snelson's seven months when Holland sought me out in my Watford lodging, of which he had obtained the address from my father. I noticed the leather binding his cuffs, and the saw-edge on the back of his stiff collar.

He made none of the accepted references to the marvellous job he was holding and the purely personal reasons that made him want to change it. He said outright: "Harry, I must have a job or I shall starve."

I suggested Smith & Snelson's. When he asked what chance he stood I replied that the secretary's system of staffing lay in picking up hungry oddities like himself. When he asked whether the work was difficult I replied that, apart from making trifling errors of arithmetic in the firm's favour, it was not so.

I spoke to the secretary, Snyder, about him, and he was taken on. Snyder was puzzled by him and accorded him respect. Holland spoke to no one except in the course of duty, joined no cliques, got through a prodigious amount of work and in fact, having finished his quota, used to ask his neighbours if they wanted help. A brain that had mastered counterpoint quickly mastered the less intricate rules of hire purchase, and his honesty was unimpeachable in a firm where it was not unknown for a nondescript to obtain a few days' profitable employment before being returned to prison.

In this way we found ourselves respectively assistant secretary and hire-purchase manager at Smith & Snelson's.

CHAPTER TWO

I

NOT THE least mysterious in the range of my mysterious passages with Charlotte Rhode, which include almost all the emotions and crises that can pass between man and woman, was that I passed two years at Smith & Snelson's before I fell in love with her. It was proof of my inexperience that I did not at once recognize what had happened. Now when those terrible symptoms appear I turn my face to the wall and cry in anguish: What, again?

During those two years she moved from twenty-five to twenty-seven while I jumped from twenty to twenty-two. No apparent change took place in her. She continued unchangeable, a fixed if enigmatic quantity, to the end of her days. It was I who changed. The mounting unrest of my blood would have forced response in a marble statue. Ultimately it forced response even in her.

I can decide the very day on which I first took notice of her, a Saturday morning in September 1923.

For most of the day Charlotte worked in a little cabin of which the back was plywood and the front a copper grille, that commanded the counter and stretch of parquet beneath it. When a cashier became necessary Snyder had been bound to box-up a shapely girl for customers to look at, as part of the service. Apart from meal-times, she escaped from this cabin only twice daily, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, to pay-in at the firm's two banks. She never mingled with the herd. When necessary, members of the herd went to visit her, and of these I was one and Holland was another.

On that Saturday morning I was seated with her in the usual way checking over postal remittances against the cash book.

This procedure had been adopted since a junior had been found stuffing his trouser-pockets with notes and postal-orders, only one result of the public's mania to send Smith & Snelson's its money.

No doubt I was irritable because in those days Charlotte infuriated me. The meek, downcast neck, the glint of tiny gold buckles on the shoulder-straps beneath her frock, the immovable locks of brown hair—even the scent about her roused an impulse to throttle her, or in some way to wreck her composure.

We were therefore going quickly ahead with our task when someone tapped at the door and Holland entered with a bundle of folders under his arm and stood with his back to the door. Indeed, there was nowhere else for him because the cabin was only six feet square. Immediately I sensed a shrinking in Charlotte, an even faster locking of the strong-box of her feelings. But Holland paid no attention to her, and murmured to me :

" I'm going to the Websters' this afternoon."

I made no reply. Holland was so taciturn that I enjoyed making him speak. He was forced to add:

" They asked me if you'd come. It's a party."

I murmured back : " Pity. I was going to Hampton Court with my father."

He shook his folders as though that were the end of the subject and turned to go. With his back to us he asked : " Shall you be long, Miss Rhode ? "

Charlotte replied : " Five minutes."

Even while thinking about the Websters, I noticed the hesitation in Holland's voice, and the self-consciousness in Charlotte's. His hand was on the door-knob when I said : " Half a minute. If it's the Websters'——"

He turned, and this time his eyes refused *not* to look at Charlotte, before passing to me.

"—I'd love to go," I continued. " Yes, I'll put my father off. I'll come."

He turned again, saying : " I'll wait for you outside, then," and was gone.

I began once more to call out figures, but inwardly I was exclaiming : " Well, I'm damned ! " and looking at Charlotte from a new viewpoint, that of jealousy. It was then, under that rather artificial impulse, that I realized that my desire to throttle her was because, like Holland, I had long since fallen in love with her.

I have often longed for the power to re-create Charlotte as I first knew her, so that I could take an objective view of her and put sense into that trite phrase, " fallen in love ". What does it mean ? How did it come about ? I am as far from understanding as ever. She was small and nice-looking—and yes, there was something else. The separate liquid movement of her breasts within her blouse not only irresistibly attracted my eyes but seemed so noticeable that I wondered they did not excite public comment. For a long time I avoided looking at her beneath her chin because I thought that my fascination would be too obvious, or rather that I was taking improper advantage of a too-obvious frailty.

But such fascination could not constitute the whole of my love for her. It did not even constitute a beginning. I thirsted for her, although in those days my education did not allow me to see in what way, still less to contemplate satisfying my thirst. Whence my love came and why it arose were mysteries, and, in spite of my education having advanced somewhat, they are mysteries still.

2

When I first joined Smith & Snelson's it was still a warren of concrete passages and improvised staircases, with an upstairs that was one vast barn roofed over with corrugated iron, where we clerks worked, and a downstairs that was the original garage, with grids, concrete floor and all, where the merchandise was stored and the packing done. Before Snyder's advent it had been a second-rate filling station lying a little way back from the St. Alban's Road, a mile outside Watford.

Outwardly Snyder was a fellow of twenty-six or twenty-eight, with a deceptive smile, not obviously Jewish, who used to patrol the cat-walks of the office working out the economics of the next fantastic purchase, or inventing the next slogan.

One could only admire him. His memory remains with me as a type of the opportunist who enriches the world while robbing its pocket, the individualist who is as likely to make his fortune as go bankrupt, and not be very put out either way.

The fable of his rise was widely known. He had arrived soon after the war as cashier, with occasional turns at the pumps, which still stood outside the premises as out of date as the snuffers in the porches of London houses. A wrecked lorry had been left on the firm's hands with a crate of lipstick on the back. One is not to know whether this crate was stolen or honestly bestowed in settlement of debt. I don't doubt that Snelson hadn't a notion what to do with it. With or without Snelson's knowledge Snyder made it up into packets, each containing six assorted shades, and to start with advertised them at half a crown each in the personal columns of two or three Hertfordshire papers.

Even then, one supposes, when only a quarter had been sold at a profit equal to a fortnight's petrol-sales, Snelson had no suspicion of what had been started. Snelson was an ex-R.F.C. pilot with an artificial leg and a disfigurement called, if I remember rightly, "camel-face". He was a morose and sometimes drunken man of forty devoted to things like high-powered motor-cycles, motor-boats and pressure-cookers. One or two of the typists had found him troublesome, notwithstanding that he had a wife and baby son.

We were aware that he held Snyder in contempt and regarded the firm's huge income as a joke. When one of us slaves had been goaded by some special meanness of Snyder's to appeal direct to Snelson, the slave generally went away satisfied—and not only satisfied, but happy in the memory of a dressing-down by Snelson of Snyder. Such an episode generally ended some two months later with the dismissal of the slave involved on some other count.

Following the lipstick transaction, Snyder paid £80 at a Willesden auction for a thousand impounded Belgian vacuum-flasks. This is a little over 1*s.* 7*d.* each. He sold them at 5*s.* 6*d.* each chiefly to the lipstick customers, of whom he had kept a record. Numbers of people will buy anything if they think it is a bargain.

Snyder employed this main principle in conjunction with a second, that people will believe anything they are told if they are told it with assurance. With every receipt he sent out a little note of thanks under a photo of a fistful of money and the words : " This is what we have saved you ! "

Although he had thus contrived a pool of customers without the necessity of a shop, he must have overheads of some sort, and we were they, who wrote his multitudes of letters. Each customer must be made to feel that Smith & Snelson's existed to serve him alone. The postage bill was enormous, but we cost even more.

The supply of us was endless, from the elementary schools of Watford, Wembley and North London, and none drew more than two pounds a week except for five superior slaves who directed the various departments, the misfires of banks and insurance offices. Of these I remember chiefly Holland and Severnake, and they might have been drawing two-ten. The girls, too, of whom sex made a separate problem, especially the little giggling creatures of Despatch, were a constant reproach to Snyder in the inroads they made upon his profits.

We feared but did not dislike him, chiefly because he saw the joke of Smith & Snelson's as clearly as we did. It was the paradox in him. During my stay he had a wide counter installed and parquet flooring laid under it just so far as the few personal customers could see, and then he had some of us photographed behind it, hard at work, with Holland well in the foreground because he had a stiff collar, and Charlotte entering her cabin because she was shapely. I remember Snyder's laugh as he added a caption to the best of them : " Another glimpse of our Personal Service ! " He may have laughed out of pride, but I believe he laughed at the farce of the parquet and two yards of counter, and at the absurdity that Holland's collar and the outline of Charlotte's blouse would help to convince the public that a forthcoming issue of fountain-pens was the best bargain ever.

Any congregation of human beings will throw off a collective psyche. In spite of all oppression and the fear of being thrown on the street next Monday, ours was one of ironic amusement. This I looked upon as the rebellion of the spirit against the shabbiness of our deals in cuckoo-clocks and nature-cure books profusely illustrated. It was the mute but invincible " No ! " uttered by human dignity.

Nothing illustrated this rebellion better than our disintegration sharp at one o'clock on Saturdays, when the girls bustled to the stair-head giggling and whispering while the men stretched themselves as though consciously to detach their fragments from the collective psyche and tack them to themselves again.

Charlotte was always the last to leave because she had to lock the ledgers, cheques and pass-books in the downstairs safe. When I watched her saying good morning to Snyder, who went with her because he held the second key, I rarely failed to think how dejected he must always be when these artificial groupings of employed and employers gave way to simpler groupings of man and woman. How jealous, I thought, how impotent and puzzled !

One could never imagine his looking upon Charlotte, for instance, as anything but a competent cashier.

3

That September Saturday I was on the pavement with the others at three minutes past one, waiting for Holland, who liked to take his time. It would more have accorded with my dignity as Snyder's assistant if I had taken my time, too, but nobody minded on Saturdays. Besides, being Snyder's assistant carried no special dignity. Rather it called for unlimited ability to swallow humiliation, whether in fetching cigarettes for Snyder or in handing notes of dismissal to one's friends. My upbringing had made me ideal.

Holland joined me and we exchanged cigarettes while the bustle of packing clerks thinned. I was glad he had asked me. His character and upbringing were still a mystery, and his interest in Charlotte an interesting development.

She appeared while I was thinking of her and slipped past with a murmured: " Good-bye ! " Holland was cupping his hand round the flame of a match and didn't so much as look up. Filled with my revelation, I gazed after her. The hang of her mackintosh in the small of her back was seductive and unique. I turned to find Snyder behind us, staring, too, whereupon we all pretended to be watching the vans and buses pouring up the road to St. Albans.

Snyder looked at the sky, sniffed and said: " It'll keep fine for you, with luck," smiled his deceptive smile and vanished into the building. We both had the same impression of his returning to go through the typists' waste-paper baskets.

" Let's take a bus," I said. " Was it Mrs. Webster who asked about me, or Marjorie ? "

And we cut across the road and jumped onto the next bus going into Watford.

However, my father was on my conscience and had to be telephoned. I felt the wound of his disappointment myself. The project had been his idea, for my benefit. At that moment he was probably in his hotel bedroom writing up orders so as to have time enough. But the Websters—all those girls, and that profusion of good things and gaiety! I could not resist them.

I left Holland to order a macaroni cheese for me, entered a telephone-booth and put a call through to the hotel. While the switch-board was ringing his room, I visualized him seated at a round table that was too small and too low, his left hand grasping his knee, with triplicate order books, price lists and discount tables spread over the bed, muttering to himself as he totted up figures and finally appending his handsome signature, *Laurence W. Wilshaw*, with a loop underneath to show that he had finished with it.

" Hello ! " Curt, almost savage.

" Is that you, Father ? I say——"

" Hello, Harry ! " Tenderness, forgiveness for the interruption.

" Are you very busy ? "

" In the thick of it. And you ? "

" About this afternoon, Father—listen, I've been asked to the Websters'."

A momentary hesitation. I imagined him adjusting his spectacles, already steeling himself against one of the blows that the young are always inflicting on the old. " The Websters ? "

" You remember. I met Marjorie at the Kensington Academy, Lloyd Webster's family, only he's in Sweden or somewhere conducting. It's a party. I can't afford to miss it."

" Oh, I remember." Further hesitation. " Does this mean—— ? "

" Would you mind terribly if we put it off? Hampton Court, I mean. Couldn't you take me tomorrow afternoon? Supposing I were to call for you——"

His reply was unexpected. He said softly: " I'm in a bit of a jam, kid," and he added in a voice so subdued that made me imagine he didn't want even the microphone to hear it: " The fact is, I was in court this morning—Bow Street."

" Great Scott ! What for ? "

Quickly, more loudly: "Oh, nothing to do with me—that is—I'll tell you about it." The words "but not now" were implicit. And in a different tone: "Yes, it'll be all right about this afternoon. Just as well, perhaps."

"When shall I come to see you?"

"Tomorrow."

"I will. Are you quite all right?"

His answer came in the tone he used to convey resignation to the buffets of fate: "Fine. Bye-bye now."

"Cheerio, old man."

I hung up, feeling rebuked by his "Bye-bye now". No doubt he was hurt, and had wanted to tell me about the police court.

Ever miserly with words, Holland simply raised his head in enquiry as I slipped into the seat opposite him, and I replied: "Yes. It's all right."

As I began my macaroni cheese I began to tell him about my father in the hope that he would respond with confidences about his own. One couldn't help being inquisitive about Holland's father who, under the name of Ygor Ferenczi, had been a violinist of note some thirty years before. I had learnt that much. Sometimes the great world sends tidings of itself flashing across the humdrum round, and this was an instance.

"Anyone would think my father a rake," I said. "He likes to play billiards, take afternoons off at Hurst Park and spend his evenings at the Stadium Club. But actually he's the born family man, though he's been separated from Mother, all but judicially, these fifteen years. All that time he's had a small room at the Grand, in Southampton Row."

I was reflecting that macaroni cheese, with a roll and cup of tea, made the most satisfying meal to be had under a shilling, when Holland said: "I was pantry-boy there for three months."

Alarmed by every word he uttered, Holland flushed crimson and did not speak again until we had boarded the train to Harrow. He was easily embarrassed, which was why he spoke so rarely. He disguised his clumsy build with neat attire and short, careful movements, but one was always impressed by the breadth of his chest and scowling, Johnsonian head. He had once confessed to being the year's welter-weight champion at the Regent Street Polytechnic, which was surprising in one who played both piano and violin.

CHAPTER THREE

I

THERE was nothing new, but always something fresh, in visiting the Websters'. The long white gate had long ago been thrown back into the hedge and left there until the gate-post rotted and the painted name " Evergreens " became obliterated by hawthorn. One entered a grass-grown drive whose edges had been broken by running feet, and walked between lawns decorated with skipping-ropes and the pages of coloured magazines. Here lay a clump of rhododendrons in which was tilted a yellow pram stuffed with dolls, and there lay a parterre of dahlias used as a short cut between side-gate and summer-house. The house itself was flat-faced, with green shutters clinging precariously to the walls and a front door that shut with protest.

Visitors were received at the back and entertained at the front. We found a girl of twelve or so hiding inside the shallow portico of this so-called " front " door, but on seeing us she put a finger to her lips and vanished in a flurry of pink satin.

Holland glanced at me and uttered the one word : " Kids ! " I saw that he was nervous, and marvelled how any motive, however strong, could have dragged him to a girls' party.

The bell-pull had ceased long ago to pull bells. We crossed the threshold and proceeded along a wide-arched passage, past the open doors of untidy rooms, drawn by the muffled notes of a piano. Another and smaller child flashed into sight, scratched her upper lip, said: "Oh, it's you!" and withdrew herself again. We were guided by her retreating cries of: "Mother, Mother, there's two more!"

The piano stopped. Only Holland could have felt ill at ease. Formality did not exist. Everything was abundant—flowers, books in small piles on window-shelves, mantelpieces or on the floor, fruit, cushions, animals, food, tears, laughter and music. One was constantly kicking over a viola case, picking a flute out of a fruit bowl, or finding a stranger practising the 'cello in a corner of the large, bare nursery upstairs. This nursery was decorated with blackboards and the relics of old festivities, and was used for concerts, theatricals, and terrific Christmas parties. Or maybe its floor was covered with the lines of a steam-train that shot out soot and wet all over the place, but was none the less respected as being the projection of someone's private and inviolable free will.

Rugs were always curling at the corners, paintwork was worn to the wood in significant spots, stair-carpets were threadbare on the stair edges. On these stairs, too, young people used to rush past one, whispering: "Excuse me." Or one might hear them tearing tempers to bits in far rooms, furiously quarrelling or furiously laughing, or unexpectedly find them curled in an arm-chair, gnawing a handkerchief and reading.

I had not seen the lord and promoter of the household since my leaving the academy. One imagined that irascible figure pitching into some wretched piccolo player, the native of an Austrian or French city, for coming in a fifth too soon, or irritably tapping his baton to quieten the boots of mid-westerners in the heathen Americas.

Not that it mattered where he was. I saw his portrait in a large silver frame on the grand that was the only thing in the house forbidden to the children. It was Mrs. Webster's whereabouts that mattered. Holland and I had come to the last and furthermost doorway when we saw a woman rise from a piano within and come towards us. It was Mrs. Webster. Even Holland felt half his shyness drop from him. She laid a hand on his shoulder and smiled at him, then at me.

“ I am so glad you came. It is ridiculous the way people are forced to wander in like this, but the staff's all busy piping cakes.” She laughed and guided us into the centre of the room. She did not really think it ridiculous. It had always been thus. A vendor of collar-studs had once penetrated to the kitchen and taken tea there, because no one had cared to question him.

Through open french windows we saw lawns and giant beech trees, with the shadow of the hill jutting broad and blue behind them. I felt Holland gird himself against the hour of trial. The whole brood was out there, centring upon a tall swing. We saw white frocks flashing among the trees, and heard shouts of laughter.

Mrs. Webster sensed his fears and said: “ Marjorie told me that I mustn't keep you, Will. Out you both go and see how prettily you can behave.”

I asked: “ Is this someone's birthday ? ”

She chided herself: “ Marjorie was sure I hadn't told you, I'm so fearfully casual. Let me show you.”

She led us outside to a flagged corner under a south wall where a lean old gentleman was seated in a high-backed wooden chair. With the aid of a stick he rose to shake our hands before dropping back and relapsing into the dim, tired world of the ancient.

“ My father, Mr. Cusbeck,” Mrs. Webster said, and, bending over the old man's head, shouted: “ This is Will Holland, Father ! ”

Mr. Cusbeck raised a hand from the knob of his stick, looked at Holland and grimaced, scraping his long chin. Holland leaned over him and shouted: “ I've read your book, Mr. Cusbeck ! ”

The old man again raised his hand and this time smiled. A bond had been created between them. I remembered a treatise on the structure and theory of the violin, by Ivan Cusbeck. Vaguely I was annoyed because Holland had scored over me.

All this time a large-eyed baby with bleached hair had been staring silently at us from between Cusbeck's bony knees. I guessed that she was the unborn infant of the Tankerton bungalow.

Mrs. Webster said: "It's Agnes's birthday. She's three." She stroked the charmed cheek. "She's not behaving at all well. The last tooth's coming, and she's only just woken up."

With that she went back to the piano. Holland was like a novice swimmer thrown into the deep end. He would have stayed with Mr. Cusbeck, but a girl in a bright blue dress waved to us. It was Marjorie, shaking out a long white rope. At the same time the baby suddenly squirmed from between Mr. Cusbeck's knees and flitted like clockwork over paths, rockery and flower-beds, crying: "'kippin'! 'kippin'!"

We followed. I found Marjorie's appeal as strong as ever, and took her end of the rope so as to be near her. We were surrounded by girls of all ages and I grinned at Holland, who had taken the other end, but his glum expression did not alter.

They had taught the baby to skip, which consisted in folding herself into a ball and then springing apart, in rhythm with the rope. It was prodigious. I began to laugh, and forgot Holland. Two Harrow schoolboys, whose straw hats hung on rose bushes, jumped in with the baby. Then two of the girls stole the hats and began to skim them to and fro. A slim child called Juliet, the eldest of Mrs. Webster's children, was heard to ask repeatedly for someone called David, until a young naval officer appeared, when she retired alone to the farthest end of the garden.

I have forgotten many of the names of those Webster girls.

There were five or six of them, apart from Marjorie. They were built like model racing yachts (again excepting Marjorie, who was said to be like her mother), swift and of the finest craftsmanship. Agnes, the latest to join their sisterhood, was more finely carved than any. They were her slaves and gave out that this last example was perfect Webster.

Of that episode, the last I remember, is that it became Holland's turn to skip. He took his jacket off, revealing a gusset in the back of his waistcoat like a jib-sail, and threw himself violently but without art into the air. A threadbare pocket-book and some loose change flew about our heads. We laughed like mad, and expected Holland to laugh, too, but, if anything, his gloom deepened.

I had no chance to speak to Marjorie until teatime, when I helped her distribute cress-fingers, apple-rolls and gobletfuls of jelly and blancmange. Her exuberance and rosy cheeks reminded me of the sentimental passages between us in academy days. She always had the effect on one of an electric radiator. I said: "Hello, Topsy. Busy?"

She replied: "Give that plateful to Juliet—no, to the thin boy on her left." She was decanting hot milk at the time. When I came back she gave me a trayful of steaming tumblers, threw me one of her electric smiles and whispered: "I want to speak to you!"

Holland was standing at the back of the room handling trifle and claret-cup with difficulty. He had wedged himself into a corner behind Mr. Cusbeck where no one could surprise him. Two more young men appeared in the doorway, answering "Hello's!" The baby was refusing to eat or drink anything and burst into tears when the three candles on her birthday cake were lighted. Juliet had overcome her dread of the naval officer and was obliging him to shut his eyes while she popped stuffed olives into his mouth. I was repelled by the spectre of Mr. Cusbeck mumbling wet toast, and pushed my way to Marjorie's side where, under pretext of helping her, I touched her plump arm.

2

Those heartless girls had conspired to make a butt of Holland. Their leader was Louise, because Juliet had taken to sitting in obscure corners with the naval officer and twisting her ankles about. Louise arranged a game of hide-and-seek, or the variety known to that household as " Alley-oo ! " Holland came to be " on ", and, having searched for and discovered one of the enchanting creatures, was forced to lay violent hands upon her and drag her back to his den. When his back turned, another enchanting creature flashed to the captive's aid, shrieked " Alley-oo ! " and escaped with her. Everyone was in the joke and had disappeared.

Long ago a chasm had been quarried out of the hill at the back of the garden. I remembered the spot from other days and had been in it three minutes, peering this way and that, before a loud " Hush ! " made me aware that someone else was there before me. It was Marjorie, and she extended a moist hand and pulled me to her side.

" There he is ! " she said.

Holland could be discerned among rose bushes affecting not to know that the wicked Louise lay in wait for him, while she was doing all she could to attract him. Finally, when he seemed on the point of overlooking her, she giggled.

" Harry," Marjorie asked. " Why did you leave the academy ? "

From the moment of hearing Holland suggest the visit I had feared being asked this question. I had found it convenient to leave the academy because I was afraid of Marjorie. She had interested me too much. Whereas I had been a failure and dependent for income upon an uncle I didn't like, Marjorie had been a fine-looking girl and Lloyd Webster's daughter.

I replied : " No money."

She turned round, her moist brown eyes so near to mine that I saw the hazel flecks in them. She said : " Rubbish. Why did you ? "

I answered: "You were one of the reasons."

Marjorie's eyes filled with tenderness as she replied: "Why didn't you tell me? It was unkind."

She might have said more, but a frightful outcry rose from the garden below. We broke apart to find that Holland had pounced on Louise only to discover that Agnes was sharing her lair of Michaelmas daisies. The baby resented his brutal seizing of a sister's arm and let out a shriek of protest.

Marjorie murmured: "Damn!" and broke away. I followed more leisurely in time to witness Holland's crowning humiliation. In releasing himself he had lost a shoe. The girls were busy soothing Agnes and the boys were convulsed with laughter. The baby burst from the arms of her comforters, picked up the shoe and hurled it through the Michaelmas daisies on to a compost heap. All her sense of outrage was conveyed in the words: "Throw 'way ee shoe."

Holland remembered the indignity of the situation twenty-five years later, when he had forgotten the indignities he had suffered under Snyder.

3

After that, the sisters relented and Holland was allowed to chat peaceably with Mrs. Webster in a back room, where I joined them.

The month was well advanced, the afternoons short and the evenings chill. Holland went off to fetch a shawl for Mrs. Webster. We observed Marjorie gathering up deck-chairs, snapping them to and handing them with murmured instructions to someone outside our range of vision. I had left the others in the nursery upstairs, whence a subdued hum and bickering descended as they played "When I was in China".

I was not misled by the fairylike enchantment surrounding the sisters. On the contrary, I knew that tigers were not less cruel and malicious than they. But while talking of Agnes, who had been dispatched to bed in pink dressing-gown and purple slippers, I remarked: "What a marvellous family to be born into!"

Mrs. Webster said: "Nonsense. Think of the endless squabbles about things like chocolate and tooth-brushes. I've given up all pretence to authority and let them fight it out." Holland returned with a filmy Cashmere shawl, which he placed round her shoulders. She patted his hand and said: "Not a boy among them. Girls become wives, but boys always stay sons."

For the last time Marjorie crossed our vision, treading the grass purposefully and without sound. Mrs. Webster said: "Look at poor Marjorie. She longs to get married. What's a bunch of step-sisters to her?"

Holland said: "She knows so many people."

"Her size is against her. Men like to feel superior. She aches to lavish herself upon someone, but they're all afraid."

I was increasingly surprised by Holland's loquacity. He said: "Rot."

"All right then," Mrs. Webster answered. "You marry her yourself. She's twenty-two. It would be a very good idea."

In the growing darkness a match was struck. All this time Mr. Cusbeck had been sitting anonymously in a corner, and I wondered what faint desires a cigarette could satisfy in him. Mrs. Webster said: "It's his bedtime, too. They want me to get a nurse for him." And in a different key she said: "Will, play those few bars properly for me, will you? You know."

Holland seated himself at the piano. He would rarely play to an audience. Now he softly repeated a phrase three times over, which I recognized as part of the piece Mrs. Webster had been practising on our arrival. Holland said: "The emphasis goes on the double knock. It prepares you for the modulation to the minor."

I asked: "What's that you're playing?" but no one answered. Dusk was now thick around us and no one had bothered to light a lamp. Perhaps this encouraged Holland. When Mrs. Webster murmured: "Now play all of it, Will," he spread out his thick fingers against what light was left and answered :

"I shall never play. My mother was a scullery-maid, and look what hands she's given me."

And he returned to his seat.

Mrs. Webster turned to me. "Composition is only a second-best with Will. That Sonata in C sharp minor is his only published work."

I answered : "He never told me."

"He never tells anybody anything. This sonata reminds one of Balzac's story of the Unknown Masterpiece, in which all the picture is ruined through excess of love, except for a foot. The sonata is that foot." She patted his sleeve again and said to him : "Never mind, Will. You'll find yourself in time."

Holland seemed sunk in dejection. Mrs. Webster went to the piano and played Holland's Sonata from start to finish. It was lovely, and I was moved. I had been assured from childhood that I was a musical genius, and that I was not one, but instead was Snyder's personal assistant, did not prevent my regretting that I had not written Holland's sonata. It was so far removed from me that I was not even envious.

The music, in conjunction with the twilight, had had their effect upon Holland. When she had returned to her seat he said : "Mrs. Webster, you are wrong about sons. I was one. Sons are cads. Harry was a cad, too. He'll tell you." I did not protest. Holland twisted himself to face Mrs. Webster. "My mother was a scullery-maid at the Great Eastern in Liverpool Street. When I wanted to boast I called her a cook, but she was a scullery-maid. Her name was Holland. My father's patronymic was Ferenczi. They may have been married. I never found out."

Holland had the serious cultured voice of a solicitor. Only occasionally would a hesitation indicate his upbringing. He went on : "The three of us shared a first-floor room in Artillery Row, Spitalfields. My parents slept behind a green curtain barely long enough to hide the slippers, feathers, chamber-pot and saucepans beneath their bed. They had violent quarrels and violent reconciliations. From my earliest days I saw the progress of their relations in that curtain. You can imagine me extended on a mattress on the floor staring at the curtain, when it shook, when it was blown out by a fist, when it hung still. You can imagine me listening to the sounds that rose from behind it, the cries, the blows, the creakings of the springs.

" Of the two, I preferred my father. He was a musician. He said he was a genius and I believed him. He was furiously jealous of other musicians, and when some famous exponent was billed to play, Joachim or Ysaye, would deride him for a month beforehand, scarcely bring himself to listen to him out of envy, but, once in the hall, would criticize him loudly to whatever neighbour stood near. Then he came home drunk, more inflamed by envy than by liquor. He would take up his fiddle to show where the celebrity had erred. The neighbours would pound on the walls and door."

What had looked like brick in Holland's character was dissolving into the shadows of a woodland glade. In one so reserved there must be lack of balance. This father he was describing was himself. After all, this was civilized society. Comfort and sophistication lay around us. This tale of chamber-pots and green curtains showed a native instability.

Mrs. Webster said : " You never told me, Will."

Holland went on : " It is no story to put about, that of a drunken father kicking one's mother into insensibility and then in remorse cutting his throat before throwing himself into a canal. It was the Limehouse Cut in Bromley-by-Bow. He was not even allowed to die there, but was pulled out to die in hospital. My mother would not let me visit him. It was only under compulsion that she herself went to identify his body. The coroner heard of it, and censured her in court for neglecting both him and me. I was taken from her and put in an approved home. This happened when I was twelve. You can't say that it is a biography I would relate idly."

Mrs. Webster said quickly: "No, but you might have told *me*. And there's a great deal you've left out. Harry will get a very one-sided picture." Holland stirred as though suddenly recalled to my presence. Mrs. Webster continued: "You said nothing of your father on the concert platform. He was pure fire. I've lived all my life among musicians, but that violinist Ferenczi——! I heard him at the Queen's Hall, and before that in Paris. None of the old clichés will do for him. You actually saw him there, tortured by his own powers. You will remember the slow movement in Dvořák's A minor concerto—it tore out your heart. One knew that he could no more last than a bonfire can last."

Holland moved restlessly, pleased, but anxious not to show his pleasure. Mrs. Webster rose, probably to switch on a light, but suddenly a double knock sounded on the door, and it was flung open and Marjorie's voice said: "What on earth——?" She herself switched the light on and stood watching us blinking our eyes before exclaiming: "Oh, Mother, you are stuffy! You know we're short of men."

Mrs. Webster laughed. "All right. You can have Harry, but I want to talk to Will."

Marjorie leaned forward, seized my hand and tugged me into the passage. The door slammed behind us. What I had feared had befallen, and I was alone with Marjorie.

She slipped her hand into mine and we walked along the hall. She said: "Harry, I know what's going to happen. This party will finish and you will go away and I shan't see you again for months and months."

"Yes, you will."

"No, I shan't. You're afraid, or something."

"I'm earning two pounds five a week."

She turned to stare at me and began to laugh. A door was open and we slipped through it into an unlighted room chiefly occupied by Dr. Webster's grand.

She whispered: "They're waiting for us upstairs."

I turned and kissed her. She became transformed with shyness. I was astonished. To hide her shyness she giggled softly and asked : " Did you say two pounds five ? "

" Yes, but you have to take off unemployment and National Health."

She giggled again, this time with genuine amusement. Her laughter and insistence puzzled me. She said : " Harry, you are funny," and timidly fiddled with my tie. In the past the work of organizing parties and inventing games had always fallen to the two of us, and I would not have believed that I should ever see Marjorie shy and timid.

I said : " I'm no good at music and I've quarrelled with my family. But, Marjorie——"

We gazed at one another in the darkness and then kissed, long and tenderly. It was no idle embrace, but the giving and acceptance of a confidence. One did not idly kiss Marjorie. She patted my cheek and looked away, sighing with happiness.

She said : " You're the same old Harry."

" It's been a bit of a battle, Topsy. I hadn't forgotten you."

She squeezed my arm and we left the room. Suddenly excitement filled us and we tore, hand in hand, along the hall and up the stairs. Only outside the nursery door did she put her finger to her lips, shake her head and give my fingers a last squeeze. I understood perfectly. She ruled a household of inquisitive girlhood.

The light in the room was concentrated upon a circle of faces round a baize-covered table and intent upon rummy. We were scarcely given a glance as we slipped into places hastily made for us and joined in the game. I stole a glance at Marjorie and discovered her stealing a glance at me, whereupon she blushed and her eyelashes fell. Five minutes later, when I looked again, I was able to take my fill of her, noting the untidy hair, small white ears and pippin cheeks with affection. She had bestowed herself upon me and I was filled with happiness.

Holland came in about half an hour later, buttoning and unbuttoning his jacket with nervousness in the doorway, looking as foreign to the party as a bailiff. It was characteristic of Marjorie that she should at once rise and lead him to a seat on the arm of a chair where he could, if he wished, join in without being prominent.

As a matter of fact, Holland excelled at card games. I dare not imagine in what unspeakable dens he had been schooled. The bank fell to him, he played coolly and with precision, and the bank left him richer by three-and-eightpence, chiefly in ha'pennies.

Because of this, the sympathies of the children veered round to him, as though he had been forgiven the catastrophe in the Michaelmas daisies. I could see that Marjorie was pleased. She fetched him a wineglass full of apple-jack, and his chief enemy, Louise, rose to offer him some biscuits. A Harrow boy—yes, I believe I am correct—a Harrow boy tendered him a silver caseful of Persian cigarettes, which he refused. By the end of the evening Holland was much less like a bailiff and more like one of a children's party than I should have thought possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

WE LEFT before ten o'clock. After all, it was a children's party, and the dew had long since vanished from many of their eyes and lips. Holland was reluctant to leave, and because Louise complained that he hadn't played to them, he sat down at the sacred grand and burst into a rumba, which was then new to the kingdom of jazz. Juliet and David grabbed shawls and began to dance while Louise, whose contralto lent itself to such feats, stood on a chair and improvised a Calypso.

This final excitement had the effect of saddening me. I was standing on the threshold feeling out of things when a yellow crack of light down the hall led me to glimpse Marjorie in the kitchen. I followed her and shut the door behind us. She was tidying custard glasses away. At once she took alarm and shook a tea-cloth at me.

" No, not in here ! "

" When shall I see you again ? "

" I don't know. Don't let them find you here ! "

" Shall I write ? "

She relented, took four or five swift steps towards me and brushed my cheeks with her lips. " There, that's a butterfly-kiss. Isn't it delicious ? Harry——"

" Marjorie ! "

" Do you love me ? "

" Yes."

She took fright again, whispered : " Someone's coming ! Here, eat this," and thrust into my hands a glass half filled with jelly, custard and cream, of which the baby had swallowed the first half. I had this in one hand and a spoon in the other when the door opened and Mrs. Webster put her head in.

" Marjorie, they ought to be going now."

" Very well, Mother."

The door shut. Marjorie said : " I'll write to you. What's your address ? " and wrote it down with a stub of pencil on the back of an envelope which she popped into her untidy handbag.

The two cool young men drove us to the station in a bull-nosed Cowley and left us with a wind-snatched " Cheerio ! " I turned to find Holland retired once more into his crustacean's shell, fidgeting the turf with a pointed shoe. Without a word we turned into the station. I guessed that he would much rather have walked from the house through the fields so that he could have opened his mind to me.

This was confirmed by his stopping in the booking-hall and asking : " Doing anything ? "

"Nothing much."

"Come home with me."

I agreed. He was still pursuing his obscure motives. Because his lodging at Harlesden lay in the opposite direction from mine at Watford, he insisted upon paying for my ticket. As he was waiting for the booking-clerk to serve him, he said with a smile: "Throw 'way ee shoe!"

It was his forgiveness. Not even Mrs. Webster knew that he contained wells of affection for the very small.

Still under the influence of the Websters, I said as we walked onto the platform: "Did you ever see a bigger contrast than that baby and the old gentleman! It was cruel. Nobody likes old age. What keeps him alive?"

As we stepped into the train Holland said: "Ivan Cusbeck can't be old. I should say sixty-five."

"Shall you be helpless as that at sixty-five!"

"I shan't have led his kind of life. He was in quod for a year, and under treatment for another two. He spent twenty years of his life in Smyrna, where they have different customs."

Holland liked to jolt my complacency. He used to say: "You lived too long in the provinces."

I replied: "It has made no difference to Mrs. Webster."

"He's her father."

The train rattled into a station, two or three people got out, two or three people got in. Among them was a tall girl wearing a white silk scarf round her head, with a cavalier on either side. I can never see a handsome girl without sizing her up, the contours of her bosom and the whiteness of her legs. But after one glance, Holland never looked at her again.

I said: "You didn't finish your argument, Will. Why are sons cads? Your story didn't make you out a cad."

He always took some minutes to answer a question. Above the handsome girl's head was a yellow advertisement of a bottle of chutney with arms, legs and a top hat. His answer is bound up in my mind with chutney, the girl's scarf, and the dirty carriage rattling through the night.

Holland said at last: "I didn't tell Mrs. Webster a quarter of the full story. I loved my father when I should have loved my mother. That is the cad's part. He used to steal from her. I was not above stealing from her myself, to be able to give to him. During his absences abroad, performing or simply boozing, she used to bring other men home and take them behind the green curtain. I had seen her do so from babyhood and saw neither right nor wrong in it. Often enough these strangers would give me sixpence or a shilling. People talk of street walkers not as fallen women but as a separate people, savages in a jungle, armed against everyone and against each other. I remember my mother. There was one fellow of whom she might have been fond, who stayed night and day with us, comforting her. He was an Irish bricklayer, working on an underground extension at King's Cross. She cried when he went. I have seen her with a sovereign or note in front of her working out what tea she needed, or paraffin, turning into goods the cash that would have been stolen by me or my father."

Usually inarticulate, he had been made talkative by emotion as others are made talkative by beer.

He went on: "It was my misfortune that I never saw the heroism in her until she was dead. Until then ability with a fiddle had endeared me to my father. I stole for him because I thought she denied him nourishment and the price of a ticket to the Queen's Hall gallery. I was in fact stealing her life-blood to feed him with envy and liquor."

He gave a short laugh. "Tell Mrs. Webster? I can't even tell you. One Sunday evening she was stabbed in the neck and robbed by a lascar. She wouldn't let me fetch the police or a doctor. I nursed her myself."

He turned to smile at me.

"She never knew that in the end I turned to love her. She was dead. She will never know. It was a sin that will seek me out all my life. I believe in a nemesis for wrongdoing, even though it is an unconscious wrongdoing. It isn't a matter of an avenging god, but of mechanics. I'm at Smith & Snelson's now because of it. I shan't rise clear for another twenty years. Even then . . ." I lost a few words, only to hear a concluding ". . . inevitable."

"But, Will," I said, "don't you believe in life after death?"

He replied: "No. I don't want to. My mother resurrected? She died in a lock hospital, ravaged out of recognition. They wouldn't let me visit her during her last few months, nor in death. Do I care to imagine her looking down from heaven wearing a martyr's crown? She's far better dead. Life hated her."

He tapped my knee to tell me that we had arrived at Harlesden, and we rose and dropped onto the platform.

2

Holland lived in the kind of back street I always associate with him, in a first-floor back overlooking the glass-crowned wall of an electricity works that manufactured resistances, transformers and electric lamps.

I asked: "Why on earth do you live in this sort of place?"

I envied him his room, except that I had to sit on the bed. This was a divan on an iron frame, concealed by cretonne with the ironing creases still in it. He catered for himself, cooking at a small gas-stove where he now stood, whistling flat, and reaching for a coffee-percolator. A long green box stood under the table, which was covered by a bright check cloth that matched the curtains. Not a picture hung on the wall, but some twenty books were contained in a small book-case plugged to the wall, and on the mantelpiece was a faded photograph of a woman in a long skirt, barely distinguishable. An old-fashioned upright stood beside the window.

I said: "You might have told me that you were in print. Have you composed much?"

He answered cheerfully: "Reams. A violin concerto, chamber pieces, sonatas, an entire symphony. I set myself to write music for performance during a film. Valentino, *Blood and Sand*. Rimsky-Korsakov was less Spanish than I."

He laughed. I said: "What a fearful waste!"

"Nothing is wasted."

"Don't the neighbours object to the piano?"

"It's against an outside wall and it's muted."

He grinned at me and said: "The young person above, who brings home three or four guests in a night when she's in form, makes far more row. I only use it for study. I fillet out the theme of some well-known piece or other and then make my own composition round it. In this way one learns all the modulations, why Schubert changes key, how Haydn scamped his duets. I found a piece by Brahms for piano and orchestra physically impossible to play, even with a spread of twelve inches."

"What do you do with it all?"

He left the percolator to bubble and stood with his back to the boarded fireplace. "Look inside that green chest."

I lifted the lid. "Why, the thing's empty!"

"A fortnight ago I tore it all up, stuffed it into a valise and burnt it in Smith & Snelson's boiler."

"But it was months of work!"

"Five years."

I returned to the divan and curled myself up on it. "Does writing mean all that much to you?" His only answer was a look of amusement. Between fourteen and seventeen I, too, had wanted to achieve fame in music, and had retired to an attic to write. Perhaps it had spared me worse forms of adolescent idiocy. Holland had apparently never got over the phase. I would once have employed that look of amusement and, like him, made no reply.

I said: "But five years' work! Wouldn't Mrs. Webster have gone through it and picked out the good?"

He frowned momentarily. "Did you hear her say that I should have told her long ago? I won't be patronized."

I was getting to know him better and felt that he was winding up to another confession. He had not yet divulged why he had asked me there. He had not really divulged why he had taken me with him to the Websters'. He became earnest, even in the way he poured out the coffee and handed me a cupful.

I said: "Thanks," and pretended indifference.

He tapped my knee and said: "Listen, Harry, about Marjorie——"

"Marjorie?"

I thought: This is it. He asked: "Do you think one can give one's best with the nervous energy left over from Smith & Snelson's, or from being kitchen-boy at the Grand?"

"When do you write?"

"In the evening from seven-thirty to ten. If I do more it spoils me for the next day. And only five evenings out of the seven."

"It's a big strain."

"Those idle nights are the worst. I make myself walk the streets or play Badminton in the Methodist Church Hall. Sometimes I go to the pictures. Once I got tight. It ruined me for three days. I can't afford three days. I can't afford an hour. I work as though each hour were to be my last."

"But, Will——"

"Yes. It all goes into the green chest, and every five years I take it out and burn it. The question is, if I had the leisure should I do any better?"

"If your name's Mozart you tumble into it when you're four. If it's Delius, you wait till you're thirty."

He was silent.

I asked: "Why did you mention Marjorie?"

"Mrs. Webster couldn't have made it clearer that she wants to get her married."

"Well?"

"You don't understand. Do you remember Mrs. Webster saying that Marjorie was twenty-two?"

"Yes."

"Marjorie's the only child Dr. Webster had by his first wife. When she was twenty-one she came into £1,200 a year."

So that was why Marjorie giggled when I told her my income! More had lain in her kiss than I had imagined, possibly as much as £1,200 a year. I myself began to giggle. I asked: "What makes you think she'd h-have you?"

Holland replied: "Oh, it's obvious. That's why they asked me this afternoon. Mrs. Webster's all for it. So is the doctor. They have faith in me."

I wanted to get away, to think things over. I said wearily: "It's late. I must be getting back. But there's one thing, Will, before I go."

"What is it?"

"You'll loathe me."

"Why d'you think I asked you here?"

"All this talk of Marjorie. You can't kid me, Will. You're fond of Charlotte, aren't you—Miss Rhode?"

His hard blue eyes stared at me as he asked slowly: "How did you know that?"

"I see more of her and you than anyone."

"Does anyone else know?"

"Not a soul. Not even Charlotte. Is it true?"

"I suppose so. I can't imagine what's happened. She's nothing—cold and impersonal as an iceberg. No brains. No music. Nothing. But I feel absolutely tied to her. I can't rid myself of her image. A cashier at Smith & Snelson's!"

"You live too much alone. Ever asked her out?"

"She might refuse."

"Yet you're going to ask Marjorie to marry you!" I leaned forward, feeling that I could afford to lecture. "Just now you spoke of the nemesis that overtakes wrongdoing. I can't think of any greater wrongdoing than running contrary to a natural force. What'll happen to you if you marry Marjorie?"

He stood up, shaking his arms with exasperation. "I don't care the hell what happens so long as I can write."

Five minutes later I left.

3

I was exhausted as only emotion can exhaust. The streets were draughty, and the arc-lights were glistening along wet tram-lines. The bars were shut and the cinemas had long since emptied. I cursed Holland for dragging me to Harlesden, the station because it kept me waiting, and the train, when it arrived, because it admitted a sour wind that froze the feet.

The day had not yet finished with me. The train turned me out at Harrow to wait yet again. When it had departed, I spied Charlotte herself farther down the platform, looking even chillier and more bored than I. As I approached, formally raising my hat, she saw me and smiled.

I said: "There's an all-night café just outside, and the Watford train won't be in for ten minutes."

She rose at once. We scampered through a cold hall and into the street. The café comprised no more than a long box with high stools and a stained counter. It was foul and steamy, but comforting, and the coffee, though poured out like treacle and served in cups like chamber-pots, was hot.

I asked: "Where have you been?"

"The Baker Street cinema."

"Alone?"

"I often go."

We caught the train in the act of moving off, which to Charlotte was a rare adventure. Charlotte always left the conversation to others. Telephoning to her was a major exasperation. One never knew—I never did know—what interested her. All the same, she acted as a magnet to the eyes of every man in the carriage.

She lived in a street of new semi-detached villas not half a mile from my own lodging. I knew nothing of her family, but imagined a mother with pince-nez, a small brother who kicked the furniture, and a sister who filched Charlotte's powder and lipstick. In our walk she asked me nothing of Holland or of the Websters, but under pressure confessed the title of the film she had seen, and that she had had tea at a Lyons'.

As we came to her turning, I asked: "Shall I see you home?"

She replied hurriedly: "Oh, no—no, thanks."

"Why not?"

"It's very nice of you, Harry, but really."

"Come along."

She stopped dead, saying: "No. My father wouldn't like it."

I left it at that, raised my hat and departed.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

NEXT MORNING, as I approached the rococo towers of the Grand Hotel, I spied the hall porter on the pavement. Perhaps he was turning over in his mind what the bootblack had told him about Arsenal's inside-right, but I had no doubt that he had spied me long before I had spied him.

I said: "Good morning, Jack!"

Without turning round he said: "Morning, Mr. Wilshaw."

"My father about yet?"

"Haven't seen him, sir. Mr. Wolfe went up to his room."

I pushed through the swing doors and sniffed the comfortable air of breakfast. There were the palms, the ginger cat licking its hindquarters on the second stair down, the bookstall, the preoccupied travellers shaking out Sunday newspapers, the glass screens leading to the restaurant, and the small man in the corner, pretending to ignore everything but seeing all, who was the manager.

The lift man knew me, too. I rose to the second floor and entered a long, dim corridor lined with doors, some of which had shoes outside them, and walked in the silence of such places until I came to door No. 257, at which I knocked.

Inside was a very small room. The window offered a view of drainpipes and tiled walls leading upwards to the sky and downwards to a well filled with dustbins. The furniture comprised little beyond a narrow bed, a small table, a wicker-chair containing a bundle of underclothes, a wardrobe, a telephone and a wash-hand basin.

My father had pushed his breakfast-tray on one side and was studying a newspaper. He had apparently been buying every newspaper published in E.C.4, for they lay discarded on all sides. Mr. Wolfe, a large man dressed in black, one of the most Jewish-looking Jews in Christendom, was sitting on some of them. My father's troubled expression did not soften as he looked over his rimless pince-nez to say : " Hello, Harry ! "

From these signs I gathered that he was worried.

Mr. Wolfe rose as one imagines an octopus must rise, in undulations, crushed my hand and said : " It'th the boy. How are you, Harry ? "

I disliked Mr. Wolfe as one always dislikes a man one has insulted. We all go through such phases. This had happened when I was raw from the provinces. Over a tea-table, on my meeting Mr. Wolfe for the second time, I had said : " Why the hell don't you go back to Palestine ! " My father had been hurt. I myself had at once felt ashamed. Mr. Wolfe had been at pains to reassure us.

" We Jews," he said, " are tho used to getting our behindth kicked that we don't notith. But you, Harry, you have given yourthelf away."

Since when, he had treated me with added courtesy as though my remarks were valuable.

Now he rose and picked up his hat.

My father said: "Don't go, Hymie. Have a drink."

"I have a Directorth' meeting," Wolfe said. "Bethidth, you have your thon." He put his large fat hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry, my friend. The Preth are not interested in you."

My father asked: "What paper do you take, Harry?"

"*Express*."

"Did you notice my name in it?"

"No. Why should I?"

My father glanced at Wolfe before replying: "It's about Molly."

By this time Wolfe had got as far as the door which with him was merely a matter of turning round, but he checked himself, went to my father's side and said with formality: "I shan't forget thith, Laurie. I am in your debt." And he bowed towards me, too, as though including me in his indebtedness.

With that he left us. His absence was impressive. I smiled, but my father was in no mood to smile. I asked: "What's happened to Molly?"

"She was picked up on Friday night for soliciting."

I shall find it difficult to explain the relationships existing between my father, Wolfe and the woman called Molly, because I don't fully understand them to this day. Whilst anxious to initiate me into the ways of the world, my father was sensitive about some of the ways in which the world used him. But I believe now that Molly was my father's mistress, that she had been Wolfe's and that Wolfe still had an affection for her, as he might for a house that he had once inhabited.

In my infancy my father had kept an antique shop in Gaol Square, Stafford, which had tended to become a gallery of masterpieces of French eighteenth-century painting. Because he would only deal in things that pleased him, and because he hated to part from anything he liked, he went bankrupt. His break with my mother—I imagine it to be a flight rather than a break—followed a year later.

By a pleasant irony he was given the London Agency, on a salary and commission basis, of a well-known Potteries firm manufacturing porcelain and vitreous enamelled lavatories. These were not domestic lavatories, but communal, accommodating two hundred males or twenty-five females, for installation beneath the public squares of cities, in hotels, town halls and so on. He had achieved success in this second career. After almost twenty years the firm was still employing him.

He still took pleasure in French paintings, and as well there stood on the mantelpiece of his Holborn office a tailless Chinese horse taken in lieu of a bad debt.

He sent my mother a quarterly cheque of about £75—and still led a pleasurable life. He attended the big boxing bouts, "followed" Chelsea, and enjoyed billiards. His tastes were catholic: who could believe that a Holborn traveller could obtain equal enjoyment from the Kneller kit-kats and the latest Palladium show? Although provincial-born, he was the essential Londoner—the elderly gentleman in a bowler who stops for a moment on the steps of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields to glance at the evening paper.

My introduction to Molly happened on the Highbury ground. She was standing near us, pale, timid and old-fashioned in a coat too long for her. My father beckoned and she edged towards us. Men frowned, glanced down and at once gave way to let her through.

"Molly, this is my boy, Harry," he said, and: "Molly has known me longer than you have, Harry."

I am undecided whether this meeting was a plot of my father's, or whether Molly's affection for him had induced her to meet his son. As she edged her way back again—she was with a woman friend—my father murmured in my ear: " There, my boy, that's an example of a *kept woman*."

I answered: " Who keeps her? "

" A jeweller in Hatton Garden. She's an honourable sort." He cleared his throat and added: " However——" which I understood to mean: " At twenty-one you should learn enough about such things to keep away from them."

On other occasions I found Molly near us at the Holborn Restaurant, and in the Circle at the Apollo, but not near enough for us to converse. I believe that my father had warned her off as likely to contaminate the innocent young, but that her recognition of this risk had been outweighed by her wanting to be near Laurence Wilshaw and Laurence Wilshaw's boy.

Again in the Fearon Bar we met her in company with Wolfe, to whom I was introduced. Nothing brought home to me more keenly the esteem in which my father was held than their interest in me. Later I asked: " Was that her jeweller friend? "

" Yes. But he's had to drop her for business reasons. He's gone back to his wife."

" Oh, I say! "

" There's nothing surprising in that. His wife holds the capital and he wants some for a new venture—the racing of greyhounds round a Tottenham cinder-track."

I laughed at the idea.

In the following months I began to believe that Molly was my father's doxy. I could not imagine a happier arrangement and longed to tell him so, but his regard for my tender years prevented me. This regard sometimes embarrassed me. I remember that he once broke off a conversation about Chinese ceramics to say: " Harry, there's something I must tell you. If you feel you must break loose, take the girl away decently to an hotel for the week-end. Keep away from hedgerows and the back seats of motor-cars."

This instruction came to me in Ludgate Circus, while waiting to cross the road.

On the present occasion he knew that I understood the difference between a kept woman and a street-walker. He put his paper down, removed the pince-nez and pushed back his tasselled night-cap over the dome of his bald head.

I asked sympathetically: "What happened?"

"One of the periodic 'vice-drives' is in full swing. The coppers know all those women. They can pull them in when they like, but they don't. The women are there to supply demand and the demand doesn't go if the women go. I'm told that some of the coppers are kept sweet."

"You mean that the women pay the coppers?"

He considered my inexperience. "There are more ways than one of making payment. Molly hinted that one of these regulars had tipped the copper off, to divert attention from herself. Molly says that all she did was stand in a shop doorway in Aldwych and try to light a cigarette. It seems that this is a well-known gambit, especially when the shop sells American magazines."

Because he disliked soiling my ears, I asked: "How were you drawn into it?"

"I had a phone call from Bow Street first thing on Saturday morning. She'd spent all night in the cells. Wolfe had already sent a solicitor. Wolfe couldn't put in an appearance, because of his wife. The solicitor wanted me to testify to her character. They didn't of course let me in court until I was needed. Jordan-Fleight was sitting, a very fine man indeed."

Here my father branched off to describe Jordan-Fleight and the extent of Jordan-Fleight's experience of the sordid. My father had waited in the same room with some examples and been impressed by them—drunks, street-women, pickpockets and a boy of eighteen coming up for his second remand on a murder charge.

I said: "Well, what questions did he ask you?"

"Oh, my name and occupation. I called myself a traveller. He looked down his nose. To him a traveller might mean that

I hawked brushes, so I gave him a fuller description. This didn't impress him either. You see, Harry, I had to impress him. The whole of Molly's case depended upon my showing that I was above knowing street-walkers. He asked if I were married."

"What did you say?"

"I replied that my wife was the secretary of the League for Penal Reform."

I laughed loudly. "What then?"

"Oh, the case was won. He said: 'Well, well—what do you know about this woman?' I answered that apart from the fact that Molly's moral standards prevented her from soliciting strangers, she was under no necessity to do so. He looked me squarely in the eyes and perfectly understood me to imply that she was under someone's protection."

At that moment my father was unable to look me squarely in the eyes. I asked: "What did the beak say?"

"'Doubt about this case. Dismissed.'"

By this time I was seated in Wolfe's place on the bed. "What are you worried about then?"

"If a breath of this gets into the home newspapers my life'd be wrecked. Apart from anything else, your mother's running for county councillor in November. Her husband mixed up with police-courts and suspected street-walkers?" He added a familiar expression: "Have a heart."

I felt that his fears were exaggerated. I said: "All this concern for a woman you haven't seen in eighteen years and who's taken over five quid a week from you all that time!"

He shuffled his thin shanks under the bed-clothes. "Ah, but then you've never so much as read the marriage-vows. You've no sense of loyalty. Nobody'll be happier than me when you make it up with your mother."

He rarely spoke of mother, and when he did it was with regret for his separation. I reminded him of what loyalty in me might lead to. "Go back," I said, "and have Ethel tell me that I have a pimply back because I don't skip, and Gwen go through my letters ?"

He replied : "I would have left home long before I did, but for them. They were sixteen or seventeen. It's an enchanting age. They are like butterflies——"

"They aren't. I met dozens of them yesterday. They are like tigers."

I rose from the bed and went to the window, the ledge of which was a jumble of bottles, syringes and pill-boxes. If my father had a vice, it was patent medicines. No one nostrum satisfied him. Either it made his ears sing, turned his tongue yellow or prevented his sleeping. So he was constantly trying to counteract one elixir with another. He would walk into a chemist's and confidentially enquire of the manager : "Anything new out ?" He was constantly being X-rayed, recommended from one hospital to another, passing from research clinic to herbalist, from herbalist to specialist. I chaffed him that his supreme joy was to be taken in "for observation", and his supreme ambition to be operated upon.

Observing me take up a spatula, he said : "Yesterday upset me properly. I consulted a new fellow in the afternoon, attached to U.C.H."

"Well ?"

"For sixty-four, fit as a fiddle." He sighed and stretched his arms. "Look in the cupboard and get a couple of glasses out."

In the cupboard was a bottle of Black and White. As we raised glasses, he winked and said : "Here's to Penal Reform."

2

We lunched at the hotel, and in the afternoon set off for Hampton Court.

My father enjoyed such pleasures through me, because I enjoyed them for the first time. For the same reason he had taken me by boat to Greenwich, to the Boro' Market and

Smithfield, to Tilbury and Lord's. Spectacle was his happiness, whether that of City clerks thronging the Bank Underground or of buses released from the Strand bottleneck.

We had arrived at the first court when he banged his stick on the cobble-stones and exclaimed: "I'm hanged if I want to go through all that lot. Let's go and look at the river."

My head was too full of Holland and Marjorie for me to appreciate the State Apartments. I began to tell him about Holland, how I had been given one glimpse of his life after another until the whole could be seen in perspective. Even to my father it was a strange story. He had heard the violinist Ferenczi and described him to me, a tall frail being, with a tuft of faded hair springing from his head, held together by his nerves.

I presented him with Holland's quandary, his obsession with writing, his love for the office cashier and the temptation offered by Marjorie's £1,200 a year. I described Charlotte as an office girl whom clerks inevitably fell in love with, and Marjorie as a bouncing soprano shepherding a flock of step-sisters. I made no mention of my own dealings with them.

His only comment was: "How marvellous if a nice girl with £1,200 a year fell in love with you! But it never happens in my family."

The air was still, and a yacht floated downstream with outflung sail, creaking in a leisurely gybe as she took the wide bend. The sky was yellow and the trees across the river heavy with haze. We stopped at the landing-stage with our arms resting on the rails to watch the disembarkation of a pleasure-boat. He began to tell me that when Gwen and Ethel were little they had had a passion for bivouacking under the dining-room table, round which they hung rugs and blankets. They would creep out of their tent to fetch milk in toy tea-pots and tiny platefuls of crumbs and torn-up chocolate-papers. Voices would ascend as they fed their family of dolls. It was a new aspect of my sisters. However satisfying my father found his life of hotels and sporting-clubs, he must often dwell upon such memories.

We strolled onto the grass embankment where others like us, lovers or families with children, were picknicking. One of these, apart from the rest, was Charlotte. Neither bored nor interested, seeing nor hearing, she was gazing across-stream, a book fallen from her hand.

On impulse I stepped aside. " Hello, Miss Rhode ! "

She looked up, then sat up, nervous of my father. " This is my father." And to him I said : " You remember I told you about Miss Rhode ? "

" Of course. Don't get up." He leaned on his stick, gazing at the pretty, upturned face. " Are you alone ? "

" Yes." It was a statement of fact.

" Like us," he said, " you feel that Henry VIII is best left to his wives on a day like this."

She replied : " Yes." She had not understood. She seemed afraid of him.

He waved his stick. " Well, I'm glad to have met you." She smiled and we came away.

I was amused. I thought he had been attracted by her good looks. We had gone ten yards when he stopped and asked : " You say you work with her ? "

" Yes. She's always like that—a dumb cluck."

" Nonsense. She's bored stiff."

We went back and my father said : " I say, won't you join us ? We're as lonely as you are."

She smiled again and rose to her feet, saying : " Yes, I'd love to." I was astonished. She placed herself between us and we walked downstream to the end of the Palace grounds and back again. I was silent and so was she. Our hands touched occasionally. My father talked of a works outing that had ended in disaster on a river launch.

We avoided the open-air café where Charlotte would have bought her cup of tea and rock-cake, and went to a comfortable hotel overlooking the river where we were installed at a table before an open window. I remember the curve of Charlotte's arm as she poured out the tea.

The enchantment was already at work.

I had never known Charlotte so responsive. My father questioned her about Smith & Snelson's, to discover whether it was as abominable as I had made out. She confirmed that it was, but said she found the nearness to be convenient.

Suddenly she began to talk about herself. She lived alone with her father, for whom she kept house. Apparently she had done so since the age of eleven, when her mother had died of pneumonia. All her life and personality had been consumed in the task.

As she described him, I remembered having seen him stumping about Watford's streets, a brusque, burly fellow with a grey Captain Kettle beard, and an artificial leg manœuvred with pain and difficulty. He had been a sailor, like Joseph Conrad acquiring a master's ticket in the hard trade of the sea. When the war came, he had captained a Q-ship, one of those tramps whose duty it had been to lure submarines to the surface and then destroy them with concealed guns. One evening, in the accident of war, he had found himself involved in a minor engagement in a West African port.

Charlotte quoted her father: "They told me to keep my bloody face out of it and I didn't, so I got my bloody leg blown off!"

He had been pensioned off, and three years before had been given a post as inspector in the Stores Department of the Admiralty, which had offices near Trinity House, behind the Tower. Sometimes at week-ends, as on this occasion, his duties took him downriver to inspect a vessel at Gravesend or Chatham, a thing he hated, because he liked to bake bread on Sundays.

We returned to town by rail. The houses were thickening before Charlotte remembered herself and withdrew inside folds of self-consciousness.

My father took us to a basement dive for coffee, but I saw that he wanted to be rid of us. He didn't say where he was off to, so I guessed he was going to see Molly. In a moment that he and I had to ourselves he said: "You never told me there was a pretty girl like that in the office," and before clapping us into the Trafalgar Square Underground he said: "It's been like old times treating a couple of nice kids again." He paid for everything, even for our tickets home.

No memorable conversation passed between Charlotte and me on the way home. I could not believe that this was Smith & Snelson's cashier. She charmed me, but betrayed nothing to show that I, who was Snyder's flunkey, charmed her. Her hand was resting near mine and stole upon it and held it. From the way we ignored those two hands they might have belonged to two other people.

We had the same streets to travel as on the night before, but now the pavements were dry and frosty. Unasked, she took my arm. I was exhilarated. Another small crisis passed with the corner at which we had parted the previous evening. She had told me that her father was not due to return until early morning.

Her home was in darkness. I held her bag as she unlocked the front door. Inside was a small, square lobby, of which one side was a mound of overcoats. She said: "You must mind the step here," and held out her hand to guide me, but instead I drew her towards me. One by one I undid the four buttons of her overcoat, slipped my arms round her waist and kissed her. The pressure of her arm upon my shoulder told me that I was not making a mistake.

I felt ourselves slowly losing balance until we fell among the overcoats. I am the only one to whom that sort of thing happens. As we disentangled ourselves, Charlotte laughed, her only comment upon what had happened.

I heard her moving up the passage and tried to follow, but tripped over the step and went sprawling. She opened a door, a ray of light fell upon us and a ferocious voice shouted: "Hello, my dear!"

She had also told me that her father's moves were unpredictable.

I scrambled to my feet and looked through the doorway to find a bearded face looking back, out of an armchair. Stretched across the hearth was a stiff trouser-leg and an empty one. Captain Rhode was in his shirt-sleeves and had on the floor beside him a jug that I felt must be filled with rum but which turned out to be filled with cold water. An artificial leg was propped against the mantelpiece.

He bawled: "Who the hell's that falling all over the hall?"

Then I showed myself.

3

Charlotte herself was so frightened as to be a handicap, and I faced the emergency alone. Two factors helped me. The first was that Captain Rhode was deaf and could not have heard us in the lobby. The second was that I am a very difficult man to quarrel with—latter-day pirates were as children against my sisters. I left Harry Wilshaw on the threshold, and prepared to pick him up later unscathed by anything that happened.

I said cheerfully: "Good evening, sir!" and nudged Charlotte, who said: "This is Harry Wilshaw, Father, from the office."

Captain Rhode stirred with passion. One could tell it from the hue of his temples and the rum-buds on his nose. It was like being in the same room as a tornado or some other elemental force

He roared (but then roaring was partner with his deafness, natural to him): "Is he, by God! And how many times has he been coming here when I'm down-town!"

This was the crisis of the storm—I walked confidently round the table, on which his collar and tie were resting, and sank on my haunches in front of the fire to warm my hands. I was so obvious a target for his extended leg, that it was impossible for him to take advantage of me. While doing so, I replied:

" I shouldn't have gone falling all over the hall if I'd been here before, sir, should I! My father and I met Charlotte——"

Here I hesitated because I didn't know whether Charlotte wanted mention of Hampton Court to be made. She took the cue. " I met Harry and his father in Cassiobury Park and they gave me tea. It's so cold outside and I thought—Harry's in lodgings behind the Catholic Church." And she added lamely: " I thought I might give him some coffee before he went in."

I knew that the battle was won because Captain Rhode expressed doubt. He shouted: " Father? Why don't you live with your father?"

I turned my face to smile at him, and told him. He grunted. Being smiled at was a new experience. Suddenly he banged his hand on the arm of his chair and roared: " All right, then—be off and make your coffee."

Charlotte turned and left the room. The captain rose and hopped, supported by the table, to bang the door after her, grumbling: " That girl's a bloody mimsy, standing there." Then he turned to face me across the table, speaking in what was to him a confidential whisper: " You work at her office, do you?"

I nodded my head. His beard sank into his chest as he reflected. Then he asked: " You know Snyder, do you—Snyder?"

" Yes, I'm his assistant."

" Assistant, by God! Friend of his?"

I shook my head and smiled faintly.

Then he leaned forward to ask: " You're a Christian, at least. Answer me straight: ever noticed that bloody Hebrew taking a sniff at Charlotte?"

My astonishment was genuine. I said: "Snyder?"

"She's not a bloody cow to look at."

I said: "No. She's very attractive." We stared at one another's eyes. Then I added: "But Snyder's got no interest outside money."

He returned to the fireside and sat down, saying: "Sure of that, are you?"

"Absolutely."

He extended his leg. "Keep your eyes skinned, boy, and if you see him so much as look at her come and tell me." I nodded my head. He grunted apologetically. "I've only one sod of a leg. Got mixed up in a private battle in Benguella, coast of Angola, 1917. They told me to keep my bloody face out of it, but I didn't, so I got my bloody leg blown off. Careless." He grunted again. He looked up at me and asked: "Know anything about the sea?"

"Nothing whatever, sir."

"Don't you want to go?"

"It's the last place I should think of."

This time his grunts gave way to rumble that I understood to be laughter. He said: "I can do with you. Don't know why Charlotte doesn't bring more folk. Play solo?"

When Charlotte returned with a trayful of coffee and home-baked scones she found him explaining why his journey to Gravesend that morning had been wasted on account of some bloody nincompoop's ignorance of the difference between manilla and hempen rope and the various thicknesses thereof. We played three-handed solo until ten-thirty. I took leave of Charlotte under her father's supervision, with invitations to come again. Charlotte was giving her last "Good-bye" through a closing door when her father's voice boomed down the street:

"Hush, my dear! You'll disturb the neighbours!"

CHAPTER SIX

I

I RETURNED to the office feeling that much more than a week-end had occupied the interval. I had slept badly, with Charlotte giving substance to my dreams. When I saw Holland bending over his work I felt sorry for him because I had exchanged kisses both with the girl he secretly loved and with the girl he was contemplating marrying.

The office caught me up in its affairs. Snyder was already at his desk, wrapped in a muffler because the boiler hadn't got going, and sniffing his way with eucalyptus through a cold. A foolscap sheet of pencilled figures lay before him. He was analysing a project to make every regular client a Christmas gift of Ovid's *Art of Love*, a publisher's remainder numbering over three thousand copies. I was sent off at once to Covent Garden to bargain for a special cover, a celophane dust-sheet and a Smith & Snelson inscription, and did not return until mid-afternoon. I had achieved success on all points, and as well had secured an engraving of Ovid's Delia, whose bared bosom, strikingly depicted as she quaffed a goblet of wine, would strongly appeal to Snyder as a sales-point.

I would not, in any case, have spoken to Charlotte that day. She was returning from her visit to the banks as I entered the office and cast down her eyes on seeing me. I went into Snyder without speaking to her.

Half an hour later, when I re-entered the outer office, I found everyone putting on a spurt to hide the feeling that five-thirty was near. Only Holland, with a growing pile of folders in the Out box, was busy signing letters. The filing-girls were gathered in a bunch trying not to be amused by Severnake, who was eating a bun under cover of a large white handkerchief behind the A-K filing cupboards. I went to the head of the stairs to satisfy myself that the packing girls were hard at it. Charlotte did not raise her head as I walked past. After five minutes I reported back to Snyder. He himself came out shortly before closing-time, patrolling the gangways with a pussy-cat smile on his face, cogitating on the *Art of Love*.

I went home disappointed, even though I had not expected any development.

The next day was one of normal routine, and about nine-forty I went to call over postal remittances against Charlotte's cash book. Charlotte greeted me as bleakly as always. After five minutes, without changing the flow of my voice (for the walls were thin and Snyder himself sat behind one of them), I said: " Charlotte, can you come to the pictures with me tomorrow night ? "

Without changing the flow of her voice she replied: " No." But five minutes later she murmured: " Saturday. Father's out."

The calling-over continued. So she sanctioned the secret between us ! It had occurred. My own unrest was hers. Her father must be kept separate from the unrest. She threw herself upon my mercy. All these things were conveyed in her remark.

Possibly to qualify her agreement she said: " Queer how Father took to you."

On that night and subsequently she left the office and went home alone. I noticed particularly that Snyder took no notice of her. As I had known, Captain Rhode's suspicions were ridiculous.

Nothing further happened that week, except that Charlotte murmured an appointment for two-thirty on the afternoon of Saturday, in the foyer of the new Rialto. The only person to whom I could convey my excitement was my father. We had been in the habit of joining company on Saturdays " to spare him ", he said, " the company of his pals ". Sometimes he had taken me to the Palladium, sometimes to a Corner House or a favourite bar in the Strand. I telephoned him at the hotel one evening and explained that I was to meet Charlotte.

He said : " Really ! Charlotte ! Is that the——?" and then paused before adding : " Well, I'm very glad."

But I felt that he wasn't genuinely glad and that he envied me my youth and put the receiver down feeling an older man.

On Saturday morning the post brought me a card scrawled with the stub-end of a soft pencil :

" Meet you Harrow Woolworths Saturday at 3.
Much love adored M "

Impulsive, scribbled at the last moment, probably popped into the box behind someone's back, it was typical of Marjorie. I had no idea where the " adored " fitted. I went to the office, angry with her because her card had brought my duplicity home to me. Yet even then I didn't regard as duplicity that I should give an arm each to Charlotte and Marjorie at the same time. It was how things had happened.

But my anger turned to warmth when, in the course of my check with Charlotte's cash, Charlotte murmured : " Father's not going till four."

" Sure ? "

" Train to catch."

" I'll call for you. Evening performance."

Nothing more was said.

I took train to Harrow after leaving the office and bought my lunch there. Well before three I spotted Mrs. Webster, Juliet and Marjorie slowly making their way down Station Road, looking in shop windows, buying a crab here and calling at a greengrocer's there. No doubt Marjorie was fuming. But then at a shoe-shop they separated ; Mrs. Webster and Juliet passed inside while Marjorie broke away to run down the street. I followed. Her crimson cheeks, surmounted by a hat of black astrakhan with a half-veil, rose above the heads of the crowd. When she saw me, her blackbird's eyes lighted up. She signalled to me to go in at one door while she went in at another. We met by the toy counter. If her aim was to be clandestine, it was like trying to be clandestine in company with a bonfire.

She pressed my hand with gloved fingers, and to cover her excitement and shyness began to tug me from stall to stall, chattering: "I know I'm late. I left them up the street, Mother and Juliet, buying shoes. I thought I should never—I said I had a present to buy. Only five minutes. Oh, Harry, it is good of you—just for five minutes!" She turned a gaze of affection upon me that was like a lamp. "No. Don't answer. Look, saucepans! Mother wants a saucepan. And it's dark there." We pushed our way to the farthest corner, hung with brushes, dustpans, saucepans and coils of cord. "That silly Juliet's got engaged. She's only seventeen. Yes, to Lord Gannet, *you* know."

I said: "But there was a naval chap——"

"Yes, that's him. Lord Gannet. A viscount. Son of the Earl of Race. Didn't you know? How stupid! Mother says she hopes they'll all marry as young."

Probably Juliet's engagement was making Marjorie feel on the shelf. Whether or not, she was cross about something. I thought how magnificently she was dressed, in a coat of black astrakhan to match the hat, a smooth tailor-made beneath, and a large crimson hand-bag stuffed under her arm. I noticed the detail of the fine lacing in the glove that rested on my hand. Socially she was two planes above me. But there she stood.

She said: "It was a milk saucepan. Do you think this one would do?" and she turned her laughing face towards me. "Oh, Harry, was it really you who kissed me?" In a flash her eyes had filled with longing. "Do you really love me?"

She wanted an answer. A saucepan with two lips was in her free hand, but for other reasons than this we were being avidly followed by the young lady assistant. I found a denial or even equivocation difficult. I said: " Of course, yes. You know I love you."

Marjorie said: " Thank you. I'll have this one," and she extended the saucepan towards the assistant and began to fumble in the crimson hand-bag. In the end I paid. I was made to carry the saucepan, too, skimpily wrapped in brown paper. Marjorie took my arm and pressed it. " Do you think we shall ever get married ? "

" Why not ? "

She was attracted by a display of buttons and pulled me to look at them. " Buttons ! What was it I needed buttons for ? There seem so many frightful difficulties in the way." Another thought struck her. We moved towards the lace and cottons, a counter that has always made me avert my eyes. She began to giggle. " What do you think ! I've had a letter from Holland—yes, Will Holland. He wants to marry me. You won't tell him I told you, will you ! My dear, it was *terrible* ! " She began to giggle again. " I've brought it with me. I don't know whatever to do with it. Shall I show it to you ? "

I replied hastily: " No—no ! " I could not sink to the level of one who reads another man's proposal of marriage. All the same, I was curious. I saw how impossibly wide was the difference between her and Holland for them to marry. I also saw that Holland in his loneliness could never recognize it. I asked: " How shall you answer it ? "

" I shan't. I couldn't." She turned to whisper mischievously, still with her hand under my arm: " Do you know what he said ? He said that he couldn't honestly say he loved me, but that someday he would."

" What on earth does he want to marry you for ? "

" Oh, for my money. He said quite openly." She brought a letter out of her hand-bag and I recognized Holland's firm, neat handwriting. " It's quite a short letter. Do read it."

I accepted it and read it. As Marjorie said, it was short. It was also ludicrous, as anyone with the least knowledge of the world might have told him. I shuddered with embarrassment and tried to give it back to her, but she refused.

" Those girls are already wild with curiosity," she said. " I bet they're looking through my dressing-table at this moment. What do you think ? Isn't it awful ! "

I pocketed the thing. " What cheek ! "

She murmured : " Oh, I don't think it's *cheek* ! In a way it's nice." She dragged me towards the stationery. " Look, Christmas cards already."

" He talks as though you're rolling."

She glanced at me in wonderment. " Didn't you know ? Mummy was a Gower, one of the pickle Gowers." She began to giggle again. " Pickles ! You are rather sweet, aren't you ! Goodness, I must fly. They'll be rampaging."

We pressed towards the entrance. Over her shoulder I caught the words : " The thing is, I'm supposed to get Daddy's permission. It was Mummy's idea. He swears by Holland. They aren't there yet. I can't think what I wanted buttons for. Supposing they saw us together ! "

She turned just inside the entrance, by the weighing-machine. I said : " Why not let them see us together ? Why can't I go home with you ? "

She exclaimed, torn by emotions : " Oh ! Oh ! It would be marvellous. But not yet. I shouldn't have a minute's peace." She lifted her veil with the expression of a frightened nymph. " Quick, kiss me—just there. I must fly."

I kissed her and she immediately turned and made off. I found a boy of eight sniggering at me. The saucepan was still in my hand.

I arrived at Charlotte's door within forty-five minutes, scarcely time enough for me to adjust my outlook. She was wearing a neat apron, and looked as though she had just risen from before a hot fire.

" Whatever have you brought me ? " she asked.

" A saucepan. For milk."

" What a funny present. I don't think we really need one."

I was annoyed that she didn't giggle as Marjorie would have giggled, but accepted the present for exactly what it was, a two-lipped milk saucepan.

I asked : " Aren't you ready ? "

She turned away to shut the front door. " I've set tea in the front room, with some of Father's scones. I thought it would be nicer." She lowered her eyes and brushed past. I slipped off my overcoat and followed her into the kitchen.

Dusk was already descending. I helped her to draw the curtains while the kettle boiled. There was something defenceless about her without a coat, in a frock I had never seen before. With her back to me, she said : " I shall tell Father I bought the saucepan. He's been gone forty minutes."

It seemed too obvious to ask when he would return. An unspoken secret lay between us, like a third person in the room. Doubtless she was more afraid than I. Each act seemed significant, the filling of a tea-pot, the going into the front room and the drawing of curtains there. She had set a trolley and we munched scones and sipped tea, she on a little straw-seated stool and I on the sofa. The only notable remark she made was : " You know, people are afraid of Father."

I wheeled the trolley into the kitchen and washed up while she wiped. Something was on her mind that she wanted me to understand, following the remark about her father. She said : " You don't know what you mean, being here."

" All those wasted years without knowing a soul ? "

She began to cry. I was astonished that she contained enough emotion—any emotion—to cry, and so suddenly and without reason. But she tossed her tears away. With my hands in dish-water, I was in no position to comfort her. Following her tears, the atmosphere softened. She flitted about putting tea-cups away, with a smile on her lips.

When I had put my jacket on and she had tidied away the last milk jug, I put my arms round her and kissed her. The secret was out again.

I let her go and she disappeared into the passage, where she turned to look at me with a white, expressionless face. I followed her into the firelit front room. We sat and then lay on the sofa clasped in one another's arms. Thought of the cinema vanished. The fire sank into dull embers, and once I rose to throw on a lump of coal. We said nothing whatever, slaves of the superstition that if a thing was not referred to it did not exist.

I intended leaving about nine, but discovered that the clock had slipped round to ten, and then to eleven. When at last we broke away we were exhausted. She stole to the front door in her stockinged feet and offered her cheek in a chaste farewell kiss. But there rose from the depths of her being a faint cry: " Harry, you'll take care of me, won't you ? "

Fear was upon me as well as intoxication as I walked to my lodging, and I fell into a sleep that was a turmoil.

The following evening about six, an hour after Captain Rhode was due back, I again presented myself at her front door, this time in formal Sunday attire. The captain was glad to see me. He had had a cold and hungry morning on the river. We took coffee and sandwiches round the fire and afterwards played solo. " This is what I like," he said, " a quiet evening together and no larks."

About eight-thirty the phone-bell rang. I learned that the telephone was essential to his job and that the Admiralty paid for it. He rose to answer it, cursing, but returned after one or two bellows of incomprehension, relieved.

" It's some damned hospital wants to speak to the Donaldsons," he said. " Run round and tell them."

Charlotte silently rose and left us. It was the first time that he and I had been left to ourselves. He grumbled : " Like Donaldson's bloody nerve giving my number. Poor as hell. Hordes of kids, all underfed. Youngest with pneumonia." He suddenly lifted his bloodshot eyes to mine and shouted : " She's a bloody fine girl, my daughter. Got a stocking pushed up the chimney. Shan't last forever ! "

I blushed and mumbled something. Fortunately Charlotte returned at that moment and shut the door, leaving Mr. Donaldson the privacy of the hall. We picked up the cards again, trying not to eavesdrop. But mentally I was too occupied to eavesdrop. The captain's suggestion had made me imagine what marriage with Charlotte entailed—a round of offices; probably a round of offices for Charlotte, too, until motherhood prevented her; almost certainly a home under this very roof, supervised by the captain. More depressing than this was the idea of marriage to Charlotte. Apart from the passion she roused, which must inevitably burn itself out, she was a nonentity.

The door opened and an unshaven head appeared. " Thanks everso. The boy's weaker, on the danger list. The crisis is coming tonight. I must pop over. Didn't know you'd got company. They wouldn't have troubled you, Captain, but——"

The captain bawled: " All right. It's all right. Any time!" Charlotte rose to let him out. The captain mumbled: " Sod the fellow. Had pneumonia myself once—Paramaribo. 'Pop over!' Fresh deal."

2

Human relationships did not allow that every convenient evening found us locked in one another's arms. Sometimes I felt aversion for her; sometimes groundless animosities filled both of us for a fortnight; sometimes with the captain's cognizance I took her to the cinema or the local Rep. But if I was difficult to quarrel with, Charlotte was as passive as water that raises no objection to being poured from one glass into another.

One Friday morning I had an invitation from Mrs. Webster, doubtless inspired by Marjorie, to meet the violinist M—— at her house on the following day. I showed the letter to Holland, who confessed that, whilst he had had one, too, and longed to meet M——, he found a meeting with Marjorie impossible. By this date he probably realized that he would never receive an answer from her to his proposal of marriage.

I therefore went to the Websters' alone. The week-end was cold and wet, and the visit proved a fiasco. Of M—— I remember nothing except that he called his instrument "the Duke" because it had been made by Richard Duke. When Marjorie was not organizing the children she was too shy to give me anything but politeness, except for a squeeze of the hand behind the kitchen door and the whispered words: "Never mind, we'll see one another at Christmas." Mrs. Webster spoke to me twice, both times to express disappointment at Holland's absence.

I returned to my lodging chilled and dispirited.

The fact was that I had only half been present. That week-end Captain Rhode was engaged with the harbourmaster at Ipswich about some missing kegs of tallow. I was not visiting Charlotte, however, because one of my fits of aversion was upon me. I longed for her and at the same time couldn't bear the sight of her. At such times my nights were a torment to me, and on that Saturday night in particular I woke repeatedly and thought of Charlotte alone in the house, of her sorrow at not seeing me and of my folly in not preferring her kisses to the violinist M——.

On Sunday mornings I usually lay in bed, reading, munching toast, and dozing, but that day I rose early and shaved, surprised to find my hand trembling. The streets were still gloomy at ten and blowing with fine rain. I had thought of walking to Charlotte's sometime before three, and was the more surprised when I found myself on the way there, with only a cup of tea inside me. The church bells were ringing, gusts of rain caught me sideways, newspaper placards were blown over, and somewhere in the town the wild strains of a Salvation Army band were borne fitfully to my ears.

Rage filled me and my eyes wouldn't focus. As soon as she opened the door I saw that she had been crying. The door shut behind us and we flung ourselves into one another's arms.

"You must let me light the fire," she said, and sometime later she said: "I must get some lunch. . . ." She opened a tin of something that would not betray that two had lunched off it. I washed up afterwards while she wiped. We were bored with the sofa and did not want to return to it. For some reason we turned light-hearted and began to laugh and sing. Ordinarily our sessions of passion did not bring us much happiness.

I said: "Hush, my dear, you'll disturb the neighbours."

Her fingers flew to her lips. "They'll have seen you come. We must go for a walk to show that we are respectable."

As she descended the stairs, I saw that she had made herself up with some of the purplish lipstick she favoured and a trace of powder. I was touched because she had done it for me.

I turned my back and said: "Put your mack over everything. It's cats and dogs outside."

We walked one street after another, came to the Town Hall and entered Cassiobury Park. The trees were hissing and screaming in the rain, twisted like arthritics. Other couples were moving about, chased out of home and comfort by the same demon that chased us. We sat on a railed bench. Her stockings were wet, and her cheeks crimson and shining.

I said: "I don't know about you, but I'm perished."

"Let's go back."

We set off. Her hand slipped under my arm. I said: "It's a day for bed and hot-water bottles." A glance passed between us.

She replied: "It is, isn't it."

Our cold hands clasped each other. I dared to say: "Do you mean that?"

I had yet to learn that the language of love is mostly wordless, but I understood without instruction the look she turned upon me, in which assent warred with timidity. I began to hurry. I could not believe my luck. A profound emotion told me that this was all I had ever wanted and that, once possessed of it, I should never want again.

Once inside the house we began to laugh and sing again. The secret was out, at last. Charlotte put a couple of kettles on, and with the first one that boiled I made tea. Night had fallen and the blue flares from the gas-rings were our only illumination. I filled a stone bottle with the second kettle, and under Charlotte's instruction pushed it into an old sock. I began to giggle again and said: "Oriental luxury!" She ran upstairs with it and had already slipped her wet stockings off when I followed into her room with the mugs of tea.

"What time do you suppose your father'll come back?"

Charlotte said fiercely: "I don't care! I don't care!"

Another fear oppressed me, a shame I found difficult to confess even then. I said: "Charlotte, I'm new to this sort of thing. You'll be careful with me, won't you!"

She began to laugh, and then shivered. "Harry, I'm so cold."

I kissed her shoulder. It seemed impossible that at last all this belonged to me. I abandoned myself as though to an anaesthetic, with the difference that I remained conscious, marvelling that a mere bed could become a vehicle of such transcending comfort.

When I later reached out my arm for the mugs, the tea was stone cold. I didn't tell her. We were warm and relaxed. She might have been asleep. But evidently she was not. Footsteps sounded on the flagged path and she raised her head. I patted her shoulder to reassure her. A knock came on the glass panel of the back door. A second. The door opened.

A woman's voice cried in the stillness: "Miss Rhode! Miss Rhode!"

Charlotte whispered: "Mrs. Donaldson!"

The person downstairs whispered to herself: "Funny!" and moved into the hall, seemed to mount the stairs, but stopped at the telephone. I wrapped an arm round Charlotte's shoulders and she turned her face to mine.

Mrs. Donaldson said: "Is that the Exchange? I want 0525. Yes. Thank you."

Then there was a long pause. Charlotte brushed my lips with her eyelids and whispered: " That's a butterfly kiss. Did you know ? "

I said: " Just think of all that awful cold outside."

Mrs. Donaldson rattled the receiver and said: " Oh! Clara—is that you, Mrs. Pierce ? Yes this is Doris, yes. Telephones always mither me. What ? No, from the old captain's house. I thought—yes, would you ? It's such a pull to the hospital and Fred's got another chill. Tell the little mite . . ." The voice began to fade from my attention and later recurred: " . . . took him to the clinic, but they only said a cold and to keep him in bed. I didn't fancy him and took him to Dr. Dalby in the High Street. She said: ' Does he always push one shoulder higher than the other ? ' Of course it was the congestion. He's had the cross on his bed these three weeks. I did feel vexed."

Probably she left soon afterwards.

We rose when we wanted to and took our time getting downstairs. I raked up the fire and made some fresh tea. I felt all the time that I ought to be elaborating some plot or other, such as putting on my coat, going out and after five minutes coming back again, but found it impossible.

Charlotte joined me at the fireside, carefully seating herself on her straw-bottomed stool and avoiding my eyes. She looked cold and pale. Almost her first words were: " Mr. Holland's a friend of yours, isn't he ? "

" We went to the same school of music. Why ? "

" He asked me to go to a concert with him yesterday afternoon."

I offered no comment and was in fact speechless that she should have kept this information to herself all day.

Almost immediately we heard the captain stumping up the path. He expressed no surprise at seeing me and we told him that we had been for a walk.

We played solo all evening. When Charlotte left us to make coffee and sandwiches we heard her singing to herself. All exhilaration and gratitude had died, and the mood of aversion for Charlotte had returned. The singing irritated me.

The captain bawled in confidential tones: " That's you, young man: I haven't heard her sing in years."

3

The development was only one of intensity. Inexperience had made me believe that this final act would forever bind me to her. But for a fortnight I felt nothing but indifference for her and hated having to check figures with her.

I no longer visited my father. Twice we made plans to meet, but at the last moment I failed him and went to Charlotte instead. Then he invited me to dine with him at the hotel one evening in Christmas week, and I did not dare disappoint him. As it happened, Charlotte and I were furiously in love that week, and the captain was exasperating us by staying at home.

I confess that my heart jumped when I saw my father waiting for me in the foyer. He tucked his arm inside mine and said: " Come along, I've got a little surprise for you." The surprise was Molly, seated at the table in an evening gown of grey and showing some embarrassment until my father's geniality drove it away.

The occasion was much more formal than I had expected, and I realized with shame that this was no casual invitation, but a Christmas treat. Lying by my plate in white tissue-paper was a wallet with my monogram woven into it in gold. I had spent my savings on an aquamarine pendant for Charlotte, and all I could produce was a couple of cheroots. The courses proceeded on their way. My anxiety to be with Charlotte made me feel like a stranger.

My father asked playfully: " And what establishments shall you patronize this Christmas? "

He couldn't hoodwink me: it was an offer to take charge of my entertainment. I replied: " The Websters want me there on Christmas Day. I don't know about Boxing Day."

All the talk in Holborn that season was of the exhibition at Wembley in the following year. From the railway one saw immense structures of concrete taking shape. Travellers, factors and managers saw a golden but hard-working year. My father gave out that his employers were renting a site in the Trades building, and that he had been given charge of it.

He said with feeling: "I don't *want* it, Harry. I was at Leipzig, and this will be twice as big. I'm too tired."

A phone call took him from us. I didn't know what to say to Molly, who was of so different a world as to seem of a different species. She braced herself and leaned across to say: "You know, Mr. Wilshaw, your father's terribly fond of you."

I replied: "Yes. A pity we came together so late."

"That's just it. He's worried about Wembley. He sees no end to it. If you think, he's a man without family. What is to happen to him except go on working until he drops?" Her voice was attractively low and husky with a suggestion that aspirates had troubled her in the past. I looked at her and her gaze fell. She said with hesitation: "I'm fond of your father or I wouldn't have the impertinence, Mr. Wilshaw. He's a dear. I sometimes think how nice if you were to set up a home of your own, so that——"

I drummed my fingers on the table and thought:

"What frightful cheek! What a frightful conversation!"

When my father returned he brought Wolfe with him, attired too flashily in evening dress with a pleated shirt. A fourth chair was drawn up. He extended elaborate courtesies to me, and patted Molly's hand as he sat down. A strange relationship seemed to exist between those three, for later in the evening my father patted her hand in exactly the same way. Evidently this meeting had been prearranged, for Wolfe presented me with a gold-plated safety-razor set. (This, by the way, I still use.) At the same time my father said to me: "That wallet's only part of it, Harry. I'm making you a present of the tailless Chinese horse and the office pictures."

I mumbled: " Where shall I put 'em ? "

" Let them stay where they are." My father glanced at Wolfe. " Hymie knows why I'm giving them to you."

Four seats had been booked at the Holborn Empire. The whole evening had been unreal and I felt that I could not face the Holborn Empire whatever pain it cost my father. . . . I excused myself, and left. The captain was still at home and we played solo until frenzy drove me to my lodging.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

I HAD MY lodging over a greengrocer's and was happy there. They were quiet, fed me well and only wanted twenty-five shillings a week. Besides which, I liked Powner, the greengrocer.

Powner was under five feet six inches high, in his sixty-seventh year, and apart from arthritis in the feet might have been made of oak. His deep, respectful voice was what one might have expected in an oak tree. The shop had been his for a score of years and, having regard to the press obituary notices, in which small traders are shown as leaving thousands behind them, I didn't doubt that he had a fat stocking put away.

But he got little satisfaction from either shop or stocking. His size was against him, he was outnumbered by a wife and daughter of forty, and he had no head for figures. The women had made the shop their territory, and Powner pushed the barrow. On Sundays he went hobbling through the streets he served during the week, but without the barrow. His womenfolk refused to eat with him and he spent his private life in a back room, on bare boards, with a truckle-bed he made up himself and a few other appurtenances, all heavily impregnated with Faulkners' " Rosemary ".

Sometimes I found him smoking under an arch of the railway viaduct because the women couldn't stand his pipe. In return for an ounce he would show me a postcard dispatched from Vera Cruz or Port Darwin by his son Charlie, who was a first mate in the merchant marine. I felt that he had idealized Charlie into something above the truth, a Raphael come to reinstate this Tobias as head of the family, see that he had his breakfast brought to him, and allow him to serve potatoes in his own shop.

" You be careful," I would say, returning the postcard. " Charlie'll come back married to a Mexican beauty with a temper like pepper and a dagger in her stocking."

" Not Charlie. He's seen too much of *them*."

On the Sunday morning after the dinner-party at the hotel, Powner came shuffling into my room with a mug of strong tea. It was a Sunday ritual, a sign that we two were men and the rest of humanity female trash. He was wearing his best trousers and an unbuttoned waistcoat over an ex-army spencer. " There's someone downstairs asking for you, sir."

I had wakened in a vile temper, reflecting that the passion of love (and I had still to be convinced that this was love) brought depressions as deep as its ecstasies were high.

I jumped out of bed and put my head out of the window. The only place to wait in was the street, for the street door gave directly onto the stairs. My head was full of Charlotte, but my visitor was Holland, seen through the screen of fir and holly that Nellie Powner had nailed over the windows.

I whistled.

" Not up ? " he said. " I've walked from Harrow."

Powner opened the street door and the two of them came up, Powner with a second mug of tea.

I had time to push a framed snap of Charlotte into a drawer before Holland walked in. I jumped back into bed with a dressing-gown on.

" What's the idea of walking from Harrow ? "

He sat on the bed and slowly inspected my room, the few books of poetry and music, the bust of Beethoven, and the new safety-razor set on the dressing-table. The new wallet was there, too, and I was aghast to see that on the top of the pile of notes and letters I had removed from the old wallet was his own proposal to Marjorie.

"Why not?" he said, and sipped some tea. "Presents already?"

I nodded my head. "What are you doing for Christmas?"

"If it's this sort of day I shall go for a walk over Box Hill. Never been there."

I felt a genuine sorrow for him. "You know the Websters are dying for you to go there!"

"You remember what I told you about Marjorie?" His colour deepened. "I wrote her a proposal of marriage."

"*Wrote* her? What sort of answer did you get?"

"Nothing at all. That's why I can't go."

"But, my dear fellow, one doesn't nowadays *write* proposals of marriage!"

"In this case I had to."

"Good heavens, what an ass she'll think you!"

He looked uncomfortable and asked: "Do you think so?"

I was sorry I had said it because he might now think it necessary to go and see Marjorie. I threw back the bed-clothes and began to get dressed. "What about Charlotte?" I asked.

"Do you know where she lives?"

"Somewhere on the new estate along the Uxbridge Road."

Having buttoned my braces, I was able to stuff his letter and the other papers into the new wallet, and the wallet into my breast pocket, without seeming to be in a hurry to do so.

He said: "We'll go for a walk. I wondered whether she was any different at home, and would listen to me there."

"You never know what sort of people she has," I replied. "Shan't be a minute." I went into the bathroom and took my time about shaving and returned to find him reading a library book, a collection of short biographies of the Masters. I said: "It sounds as though you'd tried Charlotte."

"I asked her to go to a concert with me. Nothing doing. She's cold, feels nothing. It's a type you never meet in fiction. They constitute half humanity." He shut the book with a snap and added: "Most of those fellows died early, of venereal disease."

We walked into the street, pulling our overcoats round us. It was a brilliant morning, but cold. I asked: "What shall we do for breakfast?"

"There's a lorry-drivers' pull-up along A.5 where you can get eggs and bacon for tenpence."

We had climbed onto a St. Albans' bus before I asked: "How do you account for your falling in love with her if she's got no individuality?"

He made no reply. I ventured to add: "How do you know that inside herself she's not in love with you?"

"I think she is."

I giggled. "You come out with the most extraordinary ideas."

"What's extraordinary about it?"

"Why not ask her and find out?"

A mile or two along the Towcester road we found the pull-up, with two lorries and a van drawn up on the wide cinder park outside it. The atmosphere inside was frank and leisurely. Holland liked such places and observed everything, the quartet playing gin-rummy, the mate fallen asleep with his shoes on the pot-stove, the stout woman in the rear who kept on lifting her head from the cutting of brawn sandwiches to look at us.

I said: "You can always tell a lorry-driver by his light shoes. You feel there's something wrong."

Holland answered: "I can't think what I've done. I've heard nothing from Marjorie, and Miss Rhode ignores me. I deserve some recognition. Don't I live? It's as though someone behind the scenes were frustrating me."

"What do you mean by 'what you've done'?"

He replied: "Nemesis," and began to enlarge upon the theme that his lack of success was due to the wrong he had done his mother.

I remembered that his father had been a Slav and forgave him. His singleness of purpose, the intention to become a first-rate musician, was unimpaired. He had thought of everything except failure, and it was precisely failure that these unworldly ideas foreshadowed.

We came out and inhaled lungfuls of cold air. The sun was glittering along the row of raindrops condensed beneath the wooden eaves. A robin sang its winter song, and a seagull wheeled overhead. Down the road a car came purring with four neat little people inside.

I said : " Let's walk to Dunstable and get cheese and onions for lunch at a pub."

He replied : " I must get some work done. I've had my winter holiday."

We were nearing my lodging when we met Severnake, who lived with his wife's people in the centre of the town. I had sometimes wondered how Charlotte and I in our walks together had avoided meeting Severnake. He had a roaring cold and told us that he was on his way to take Sunday school.

When he had passed on, I said : " Tomorrow Snyder will learn that you and I went for a walk together."

Holland replied : " You mean from Severnake ? Queer fellow. Strikes me as having a secret."

Not for the first time I wondered at Holland's percipience. The bumptious Severnake a man with a secret ? Yes, he had been a solicitor's clerk, fired and narrowly escaping imprisonment for attempting to procure an abortion on his wife. I had charge of staff records. I murmured : " Perhaps he has. . . . You'll never guess what Snyder's scheming. An office dance. Severnake's suggested his own church hall."

" That'll cost Snyder money, won't it ? "

" Oh, he'll charge us a bit for it and blackmail those who refuse to come. He wants free advertisement to attract staff.

You may have noticed that those he doesn't fire leave after one smell of the place."

Holland almost laughed.

2

I went to the Websters' party without enthusiasm. The captain was at home over the holidays and I was resigned in any case to being apart from Charlotte, but I could not pretend that I looked forward to deceiving Marjorie.

In fact I enjoyed myself enormously. In addition to the air of comfort usual to the Websters was the spirit of Christmas, reborn in the fancies and enthusiasm of children. At this Christmas, too, Juliet's engagement was celebrated, so that I could not decide whether Agnes queened it, flitting about in a new frock with pink garlands, or Juliet whispering in her betrothed's ear.

The betrothed himself, enslaved by her innocence and love, was charming, and his goodwill was not dispelled when he found himself locked in the coal-cellar by those diabolic girls.

I asked him which branch of the service he was in, and he replied that he was in the trade and sailed a boat, which seemed to be technical expressions, and left me none the wiser.

Many of Marjorie's duties had been assumed by the nurse engaged to look after Mr. Cusbeck. I never learnt the nurse's name. She wore a pink uniform with starched cuffs, collar and cap, but I caught at least one glance that told me she was under thirty, single and good-looking. I would hear her shouting: "Time for your beef-tea, Mr. Cusbeck!" and five minutes later she would be behind me, handing round pudding-plates or snuffing candles.

Marjorie was thus given more freedom. We came together naturally in the supervision of games and were set side by side at table. Although the dinner excelled all others, she was subdued. Mrs. Webster, too, was subdued. Even here ghosts might be seated at the feast.

Louise had decorated the table with ivy and stacks of crackers. Parcels lay beside every plate. The two Harrow boys had found mortar-boards and became schoolmasters. Lord Gannet had taken Agnes onto his lap, where she helped herself from his plate. The big room filled with the sound of laughter, the clatter of plates, the screams as crackers burst or did not burst. . . .

By chance, a cracker had provided Juliet with a tinsel coronet which she had set upon her hair, and the look that Marjorie shot at her told me where her ghost was sitting. She herself had been given a pin hung with a tiny wooden shoe, traditional emblem of old maids. Fate had dropped into my hand a solitaire ring.

A farcical incident happened in the afternoon. When we had roused from the stupor of dinner we played sardines, which entails going to search for someone in hiding, and, having found him, squeezing in beside him, until all are squeezed in and none remain to search. David became the original sardine. I myself was still thick-headed. In the early stages of the hunt I found a small room with drawn curtains and a bed, and gave way to the temptation of lying on it.

Presently the door opened and Marjorie's voice whispered: "David!" I did not reply. The door shut and she laid herself silently on the bed beside me.

I gave myself a few minutes and then said: "Hello!"

"Oh, my goodness, Harry, I thought you were David!"

"I know."

She stifled a laugh. "You're no gentleman."

"I do feel rather naughty."

"Don't you know where you are? This is nurse's room."

"Well, she's very good-looking."

She began to giggle. "Isn't it like you!" Then she stopped giggling to whisper: "I say."

"What?"

"Mother's huffed. She expected Daddy to be home for Christmas."

"Your Daddy never does what's expected of him."

She murmured: "I don't think he ever will come home." I digested this opinion. She added: "I shouldn't."

"What are you saying!"

"I'm tired to death of children. They aren't even my sisters. I want to go to San Remo and sleep in the sun." No doubt the dark gave her courage to utter these heresies. Already she repented, for she squeezed my hand and said: "Come on."

As we sat on the edge of the bed she allowed me to kiss her, but no more. "You know I don't like petting," she said, and immediately sank her head on my shoulder. "Oh, Harry, you are a dear!"

She was in any case difficult to pet because of her size and the stiff things she wore to encompass it. I reflected how unlike my anguish for Charlotte was the kindness I felt for Marjorie.

Our conversation was continued later in the evening, but before then Mrs. Webster had beckoned me to the corner in which her ghost was keeping her company. She had been absent most of the afternoon, and I had observed her return apparently without noticing the hands of children reaching to her waist. The gramophone had been put on, and I lifted Agnes from my shoulder where she had been dancing with me, her head among the streamers.

"You've got a touch with children," Mrs. Webster said. "Harry, why isn't Will here?"

Like Holland himself, she was direct. I replied with hesitation: "Oh, well, if you ask me——"

"I do. You're his friend."

"I think Marjorie may have something to do with it."

"Has she turned him down?" And when I made a gesture of embarrassment she added: "I can't ask her. She's not my daughter."

I replied: "Supposing she has—he is a bit raw, isn't he?"

She considered this. "Yes, I see that. But you must realize what a fine thing it would be for both of them ultimately."

"From what I know, Mrs. Webster, these things arise from spontaneous combustion. It's no use going round with a box of matches, puffing."

She laughed. "At least we can keep the firelighters dry for them."

By this time Agnes had crept round to reclaim me. "No you dance with me?" Her day was so short, even at Christmas, and in half an hour she must go to bed. . . . I was swept back into the throng again, and only later began to wonder whether Mrs. Webster might not be jealous of Marjorie, and whether Marjorie might be not aware of it.

Human behaviour is so subtle and changes so imperceptibly that "jealousy" must signify a range of dispositions from impatience to the affection of habit. They were both too warm-hearted to contain anything more vicious. All the same, they were both female. And Marjorie was so different from the others, physically and by nature, so much more authoritative, so much less of an artist, that in the recesses of her heart Mrs. Webster must sometimes have thought of her as an alien—but an alien who was her husband's first-born and his first wife's heiress.

For her part, Marjorie was said to be very like her mother, who had thrown herself and her wealth upon an unknown musician with a generosity and impulsiveness that were both Marjorie's. Marjorie found herself removed from the eldest of these other Websters by five years, and that eldest had got herself engaged while she, Marjorie, who longed for marriage, remained to nurse an indefinite number of younger Websters up to the marriageable state. It was intolerable.

As the evening progressed through charades and spinning-the-trencher, I found Marjorie's eyes upon me. When snap-dragon was brought in she took me by the hand up the back stairs to a recess made warm by the hot-water cistern, where we sat down among towels. Her arm slipped through mine.

She turned her lustrous eyes upon me and said: "This is the best private place I could think of. Say nice things to me, Harry."

I kissed the red pippin of her cheek and, as I did so, thought of Charlotte. If only, I thought, I could be married to Marjorie now, that very night, the pain would be ended, I should irrevocably be bound to her, the endless hunger of the body would be assuaged.

I whispered: "Marjorie, why can't we be married?"

"I have to ask Daddy. It's not legally necessary, but it was something Mummy wanted."

"But supposing your father never comes home!"

She was silent.

I said: "We could be engaged!"

She replied bitterly: "I'm not seventeen. And besides—in this house, now! I don't like engagements. I would never be engaged. But, married——!"

I said: "Look, Marjorie," and I fished for the cracker's solitaire ring that I had slipped into a waistcoat pocket. "Take this and let us be secretly engaged. I give myself to you and you to me—here—taking this linen cupboard for witness!"

She pouted and looked dubious, then her lips began to curve in a smile and she accepted the ring. It fitted the little finger of her right hand. She said: "You are sweet, and I do so love you." We exchanged a solemn kiss. A feeling of unreality made me squirm.

I said: "Do you remember how much a week I get to keep you? This Christmas it went up to two pounds seven shillings and sixpence, less National Health, Unemployment and the Hospital Saturday Fund."

She giggled breathlessly. "Do you? What's a Saturday Fund? I don't spend much. We shouldn't even have rent to pay. I've got Mummy's house at Stanmore, with all her furniture."

"Good heavens! You ought to have warned me before we got engaged."

The moist eyes looked into mine. "If you could only take me to it, now, this instant!"

"I had the same idea."

She sighed and patted her hair. A door opened and shut downstairs, emitting a phrase of music and shouting. Already the hope was beginning to nag that if I left soon, and hurried home, I might see Charlotte.

I replied: "They'll be wondering."

I helped her to rise, and we made our separate ways back to the drawing-room.

Half an hour later I left. The Websters never minded their guests leaving early, because the children must be got to bed. The engaged couple had already gone racing off by car to Lord David's home in Portman Square. Mrs. Webster was not to be found, and Marjorie could accord me no special farewell because the others came crowding to the door.

When I arrived at the captain's house, it was in darkness, back and front. As I was staring at the windows I suddenly realized the madness of what I was doing. I said to myself: "What the deuce are you up to? These are human lives you are dealing with."

But half-way home I began to laugh.

3

I would have spent Boxing Day with my father, but he, with Wolfe and Molly and one or two others, had gone to Brighton on a spree that he would gladly have missed but felt was necessary for business reasons. These, I knew, were the selling of a new and more expensive class of urinal to Brighton Corporation, but he hoped at the same time to pick up a miniature by Leclerc *fils* that Wolfe had noticed in a side street.

I was therefore left to watch Watford Amateurs at home to Uxbridge Rovers, in company with Captain Rhode. It was a dry but bitter day, and my mind was occupied with Charlotte. Attending a football match in company with a character out of Dickens called for all my patience and I began to understand the reason for Charlotte's passivity.

However, he rewarded me after the match with a poke in the ribs and the remark: "Go again. You don't get on my bloody nerves."

In any case he was going to spend the rest of the day with friends at Ealing, and I made it my duty to see him onto the train before turning back to Charlotte.

A disquieting thing happened on my way there. I was turning into Union Road when I saw Holland coming towards me. His head was lowered in a typically meditative attitude, and I had time to dodge aside before he passed me on his way to the station. More disquieting still, I discovered Charlotte at home in the act of taking off her overcoat. I kissed her, thinking to myself: "This is no concern of mine. Holland's presence in Watford on Boxing Day and Charlotte's going out for a breather is pure coincidence. Even if they met, nothing could have passed between them."

I followed her into the front room, knelt down to warm my hands and astonished myself by exclaiming: "So you've been out!"

She had seated herself on the straw-bottomed stool. "I had to find a chemist's. I've got a headache."

Fury consumed me. It was a euphemism in which she herself had instructed me. I felt sure that she was smiling and I had to control my voice: "See Holland?"

"Yes."

Nothing more. Charlotte would have left any conversation at bare assertions. I was forced to ask: "What on earth did he come round here for today?"

"To see me."

"But he didn't know where you lived!"

"Roughly, he did. He just hoped he'd see me."

My temper began to get out of hand. I pride myself on never giving it an inch. I said slowly: "What did he want?"

"There's a concert at the Albert Hall tonight."

There was. Gigli was singing. I had considered going to hear him myself, and again considered it. But I couldn't decently leave Charlotte now. I began to say and ended by shouting : " You'll be telling me next that you love him ! "

I was at once ashamed of myself, and turned to look at her. She was not smiling, but gazing sadly into the fire. For a few minutes she was silent and then said, as a result of prolonged mental effort : " He's a quiet boy, isn't he ? I sometimes think he's had a life like mine—badgered. But he's come out differently."

We sat on opposite sides of the hearth chatting about the office dance, drinking tea and raiding a piled plateful of dripping toast. Gradually my attitude relaxed into tenderness. She wanted to make a quiet evening of it, but I could not endure the prospect : temptation offers no hardship until it has been offered and taken away. We went to the cinema and queued twenty minutes to see the last hour of the performance.

4

The office dance was held on the first Saturday after Christmas because Snyder didn't want sore heads at the office. I had wondered how I was to arrive in Charlotte's company without exciting comment, but the difficulty was taken from me by Snyder himself. Lifting his head from his blotter (I had my desk in a corner of his room), he said : " Wilshaw, you don't live far from Miss Rhode, do you ? "

" About a mile, I suppose."

" Then you'd better call for her. I'll mention it to her."

" Who is to take her home afterwards ? "

The smile that was no smile widened a fraction. " You wouldn't object, would you ? " And he lowered his head again.

I called in a taxi. My sisters had always laid down that they must be taken to a dance in a taxi. Charlotte answered the door and skipped back into the light so that I could see her better. She was attired in a new evening frock of coffee-coloured lace, with a shawl that the captain had brought from Barcelona. Excitement had brought a blush to her cheek and I would not have minded if she had been wearing an office frock.

" It looks marvellous," I said.

She fetched a cloak and began to lock doors. There was no sign of the captain. I craved to ask where he was. She understood my craving, but would not satisfy it. We took a last look in the kitchen and there I saw two bowls set on a tray, with spoons and squares of bread.

Locking the door, she said: " Soup is always nice when you get back," and added as afterthought: " Father's at Chatham till tomorrow lunch."

I put an arm round her shoulders. " Let's not go," I said. But she slipped away and opened the front door.

An office dance is at best a function of incongruities, and this was Smith & Snelson's. About seven dinner-jackets belonging to retired officials and fallen professional men like Severnake were sprinkled among coloured shirts and flannels. Snyder wore a flannel suit of the palest grey. Holland was in serge. Snelson was wearing tails and the D.F.C. ribbon, and accompanied a tall handsome girl in a Bond Street gown, who was his wife. All the despatch girls and most of the typists and filing clerks wore shiny frocks of satin, coloured saffron, indigo or crimson, with bangles of coloured glass round their elbows, stuffed with hankies.

Still with a cold, Severnake sniggered to me under cover of a large handkerchief: " Careful, boy. They'll have your braces off you if you look twice at 'em."

Severnake was officially M.C., but Snyder expected me to look after the evening's smooth-running. Snyder knew his own social deficiencies and spent most of the time sitting in a corner under a picture called " Come unto Me ", sipping ginger-ale. Half-way through the evening I happened to notice a new expression on his face, and looked round to see Holland dancing with Charlotte. The band was playing a nostalgic waltz called " Love is on my Trail ", which I recognized as the latest variation of my grandfather's composition " Zion's Towers." Holland managed his big bulk deftly, and Charlotte appeared more than passive, she was at peace. This was my first intimation that there might be something in the captain's suspicions.

Snyder saw me looking at him and immediately rose and walked across to where I was standing with Severnake.

" We'll have the photos next, Severnake," he said.

For him the photos were the only purpose of the evening. He had us all grouped at one end of the room, standing on chairs, clustered round a trestle-table or sitting before it, and distributed various balloons and paper-hats to give a correct air of abandon. On the table were placed representative products of the firm, with Ovid's Delia and a nature book prominently featured. He himself stood in the centre with Mrs. Snelson on one hand, Charlotte on the other, and Snelson's sardonic camel-face gazing over his shoulder. When the picture came out, it was found to include a wall-text reading : " Make His Paths Straight," but on Snyder's instructions this was omitted by the block-maker.

The affair was due to end at midnight. Throughout the evening I forced my eyes away from Charlotte and allowed myself only one dance with her, the supper-dance. Then we exchanged only conventional remarks except that once I whispered : " Charlotte ! "

" You must call me Miss Rhode."

" I told the taximan to call back at eleven."

She replied merely : " Won't they miss us ? "

Trouble was bound to arise from the mixture of elements present : we were busy enough at the office harnessing together the factory graduates and career girls, the pensioners and errand-boys, the ex-solicitor's clerks and barely literate packers. One of these last was a carrier called Rolfe, a bandy-legged hunchback with an affection of the lips that twisted his speech. A lunch-hour's recreation was the tormenting of this wretch: now they had taken him into a back room and were supping him on beer.

The supper was of the running-buffet order and unlicensed because of the church next door, but no one could be unaware that a case of beer was being consumed under Snelson's patronage in the room normally reserved for Bible-classes. Nothing would have pleased Snelson more than to bring discredit upon Snyder. Charlotte and I, with Holland, Severnake, Snyder's typist and one or two others, had gathered with our coffee and sandwiches in a corner from which we could hear the tipplers' bursts of revelry.

"Go on," Snelson was saying, "have another! Snyder'll pay for it."

Severnake looked at me uncomfortably because the hall was hired on his intervention, but I shook my head. "You can't do anything. Snelson——"

At that moment there was the sound of shattering glass, the door to the class-room was kicked open and Rolfe appeared, holding by the handle the fragments of a glass water-jug. Scared and giggling youths clustered behind him. He wandered towards our group scything with his jug-handle and muttering something that sounded like: "Bikth! Bikth!" Severnake approached him and narrowly missed having his nose sliced off. The rest of us gave ground. Only Holland stood where he was, staring down at Rolfe, a rock of moral strength such as that church hall had rarely seen. Rolfe made an uncertain sweep of the arm, Holland caught the jug-handle with one hand and with the other grasped Rolfe by the shoulder and pushed him back into the class-room.

I told the band to strike up, and Severnake organized a Paul Jones. Holland re-emerged with a right hand dripping with blood and was directed to a first-aid kit in the caretaker's room, whither Charlotte, who was practised in such things, conducted him. Snyder came to ask why I had not stopped the scuffle before it had begun, and was referred by me to Snelson.

Apart from a week's gossip and a year's reminiscence, the incident was over.

Holland and Charlotte did not reappear. I strolled across to the caretaker's room and had waited ten or fifteen minutes outside the shut door when it opened and Charlotte came out. I glimpsed Holland within, leaning heavily against the mantelpiece with his back to us. The door shut.

I asked Charlotte: " What's happened? "

Her lips were trembling and there was a pinched look in her eyes. She said: " Harry, take me home."

I put my coat on, found the taxi and met her coming out of the cloakroom. In the taxi she said nothing whatever, and I was afraid that she would burst into tears.

When I had thrust the door open for her she ran up the garden path. I found her fumbling for her latch-key. She turned round and said: " Thank you," as though telling me to go.

I put my hand on her shoulder and said: " But the soup——"

" I don't want to see you again."

" Holland asked you to marry him! "

She replied: " He did." Charlotte always found it an effort to put her thoughts into words. " How can I marry him—anyone, now you've——" and she regarded me with horror.

I said: " But, Charlotte, you can marry me! "

She had found the latch-key and inserted it into the lock. Turning her head, she replied: " The taxi's waiting."

The door shut in my face. I returned down the garden path kicking the withered chrysanthemums, paid off the taxi-driver because he had witnessed my humiliation, and walked back to Powners'.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

OF COURSE, the affair could not stop at that.

Every morning we checked over figures and otherwise met in the course of business, but she did not melt. Out of pride I refused to make the first advance, and swayed between loathing, relief and tenderness.

One raw Saturday evening, in the covered market, I came face to face with Charlotte and her father at the corner of a crockery stand and a seller of toffee-apples. I was holding four toffee-apples, intended for my neighbours' children, and Charlotte a stick of celery done up in newspaper. Drama is not compatible with such circumstances.

I smiled, Charlotte looked aside and the captain bellowed: " God's sake, you'll get the guts-ache with all that bloody lot inside you! " He then poked me in the waistcoat with his stick and said: " Ain't seen you lately. Doing anything? Come along with us—tea, warm fire and a hand or two afterwards."

I glanced at Charlotte, who looked much as usual, that is, indifferent. Out of mischievousness I went home with them, had tea, played solo and came away at an early hour warmed and cheered. Nothing in our amicable chatter hinted that I was the seducer and Charlotte the seduced.

I saw Marjorie once during that period and again in March, for a few minutes only. No development took place.

Snyder did not allow private phone calls to be sent or received at the office, and our switch-board girl had orders to remit such calls to him. Marjorie knew this. He answered a ring one afternoon and lifted his head to say: " Here, Wilshaw, it's for you. You'd better answer it. It's a woman."

I took the receiver.

" Mr. Wilshaw ? " I couldn't place the voice, but at least it wasn't Marjorie's. " This is Miss Roper. You remember—Molly."

" Molly ! "

" Mr. Wilshaw, don't tell your father I phoned you. You won't, will you ? He's been poorly. No, he's better now. But still in bed—at the hotel. You haven't been to see him. It's not for me to—but Mr. Wilshaw, he's lonely. Only one or two of the travellers, and he's not keen. . . ."

" What's been the matter ? "

" I don't know. I haven't seen him myself. I can't tell you. But if you'd go and see him ! He's fond of you. You'll do him good. You'll excuse me. You'll promise not to tell him ? All right. Good-bye."

I replaced the receiver. Snyder sneered : " Molly ! "

" It's someone to tell me my father's ill."

Snyder could never bring himself to make a direct rebuke, and I added : " She won't ring again."

I left sharp at five-thirty, caught a steam train and was in my father's room within an hour.

He was lying in bed suffering from boredom. He was delighted to see me, patted a place near him for me to sit on, sent me to investigate in the wardrobe, and later rang to order a meal for me. His personality always made some slight inroad into the hotel's anonymity.

" It's very decent of you to come all this way. That girl of yours released you for the evening ? I don't blame her for keeping you. How is she ? "

" You mean Charlotte ? "

He nodded his head in surprise. I had often been tempted to confess to him the full story of Charlotte and Marjorie. " Is there anyone else ? "

" Charlotte and I aren't on very good terms at the moment. There's always been Marjorie Webster." I did not dare go further. " But you haven't told me what's the matter with you. What's the doctor say? How long have you been like this?"

He stretched himself, put his hands behind his head and said: "Nothing. Nothing's the matter. I'm tired, that's all. The hotel doctor tells me to rest; says I'm not forty. These doctors never know anything and, if they do, keep it to themselves. This one only visits me for the sake of my whisky. But actually——" I was waiting for this. He leaned forward, retrieved the pince-nez that tumbled into his lap, and shook a forefinger at me. "Actually it's a form of arterio-sclerosis. I know my own body. I can hear murmurs I didn't hear ten years ago. And when I press here—and here——"

I let him continue. After a while I said: "If it's arterio-sclerosis, why doesn't the doctor say so?"

"Ah! He doesn't tell me because he doesn't want me to worry. Worry aggravates arterio-sclerosis. That's why he doesn't tell me."

It was the trump card of all valetudinarians. He described for me the symptoms of arterio-sclerosis. When a pause came I interjected: "What about Wembley?"

All his enthusiasm collapsed. I knew that I had hit the true reason for his illness. He said: "Wembley! Don't talk about it. Here I lie, and the thing's supposed to open in May. The firm hasn't chosen its exhibits and won't listen to my recommendations. The staging's not arrived, and all the contractors have been nobbled by the others. Stop-press is a letter from the Exhibition saying there's some doubt about the site of my stall."

"I should say that things are boiling up nicely."

He grunted a laugh. "You do me good. How did you know I was poorly?"

I had feared this question. His relationship with Molly had always been mysterious and now some development had occurred that made her not able to see him in his illness. I replied: "Oh, I hadn't heard anything of you for weeks. The hall-porter told me."

This seemed to satisfy him. He said: "But you, Harry—what have you been doing?"

I replied: "It's effort enough merely to keep alive this weather."

He nodded his head and lay back on the pillows.

"Lying here day after day I've had time to reflect. One doesn't reflect often or long enough. Perspective and proportion come with reflection. At times I acquired the power of seeing our lives as though at a distance."

"You've been bored stiff," I said. "What did our lives look like?"

He said: "Small," and sat up again for emphasis. "Harry, my boy, I find it essential for you to make it up with your mother as quickly as possible." I began to protest, but he held up his hand. "She *is* your mother. Although serious-minded, she is a sensible person, and you are her only son. The fact that I couldn't get on with her is my own affair. And besides, I am not so sure that even I . . . Time also is a remedy."

His voice faded. I looked at him sharply. Molly had sown suspicion in my mind. He was growing old—he was, in fact, ill—and he found himself alone in an hotel bedroom. Was it possible that he wanted to effect a reconciliation between Mother and myself so that I should effect a reconciliation between her and him?

I said: "You never knew Gwen and Ethel in their later years."

He replied: "I hear rumours of Gwen's engagement to a promising young greengrocer of Marsh Street, Hanley."

I cried: "No!" and began to laugh. My father would not allow criticism of my sisters and did not smile. I went on: "And there's still Uncle Crawshay."

"I feel quite equal to dealing with Uncle Crawshay."

I said: "That fellow was the bogey of my childhood."

"All bogeys take flight before ridicule. It's the secret of human behaviour."

We began to exchange jokes about Uncle Crawshay. My supper was brought in together with lighter fare for my father, and we consumed it gaily. I learned a curious thing about him, that he had had a superstition he was doomed to die at sixty-four. This had begun twenty years before when his own father, Sir Richard, had died at that age, and been confirmed by an elder brother's death at sixty-four. He told me that his relief upon passing into his sixty-fifth year had been so great that it had made him ill. More than once I was on the point of confessing the fix I was in between Charlotte and Marjorie.

He exclaimed at last: "Well, well—all this points to the fact that I need a holiday. You, too. I can see that you've got something on your mind, and I bet it's that nice young girl. Are you doing anything at Easter?"

"No, but——"

"Then, look here, we'll book up at the Ship at Brighton. What do you say?"

"I should love it."

"There's just one thing——" He looked ashamed. "I wonder if you'd mind sharing a room with me? I'd like to lie and talk to you. All the year round——" and he waved his hand at the room that was his home.

I was touched. "Of course, Father." And I skated off the subject. "Won't Molly have something to say about it?"

He put on his most innocent look. "Molly? Why should she? She never had anything to do with *me*. Besides, Wolfe's taken her on again."

"Wolfe!"

"Having got all the shares he wanted out of his wife, he's set Molly up again in the Cork Street flat. I'm very glad, for her sake." He breathed heavily and ruined the effect by exclaiming: "Harry, there's not a soul in the whole damned world you can trust!"

I left about ten, having learned that he intended to get up on the following morning.

2

I was going through a phase of loathing Charlotte when our situation was reversed.

Five-thirty had struck one evening and I was turning off heaters and lights at the back of the filing department when I noticed Snyder in conversation with Charlotte at the counter. He was leaning across it in an exaggerated posture, while she was standing dressed, ready to go home. Holland was still at his desk, skimming through a ledger with a rasp of turned leaves, and two or three senior girls were sitting relaxed on their stools, busy with powder-boxes.

Suddenly I heard Charlotte call : " Mr. Wilshaw ! " and I went across to them. Charlotte was looking normally unconcerned, but Snyder hunched his shoulders in embarrassment.

Charlotte said : " Will you please see me home ? " I looked at Snyder, but he was already turning round on his way downstairs. He always jog-trotted downstairs, and his shoes were always hobnailed. When I went for my hat and coat I found everyone except Holland looking at me. Marvellous the instinct those office girls had for scandal ! I was the most mystified person present.

Half-way home, traversed in silence, I said : " You do the rummest things, don't you ! " but she made no reply. We were turning into her street when I said with fury : " You'll get me sacked ! " She turned her face to mine and suddenly began to titter.

She said : " Do you know wh-at, he wanted me to—to——" but laughter prevented her finishing. She clasped my hand and I began to laugh, too. A warmth within me melted all the bitterness of the past two months.

When she had opened the front door I glanced at her and she said : " I shan't bite you." In the lobby I helped her off with her coat. She turned for a moment to look at me, her face still full of smiles and friendliness. What an ass I'd been! I took her into my arms and kissed her.

We went into the kitchen singing and made tea, cut ourselves hunks of new bread, and put our feet on the boiler.

"That's new," I said, pointing to a radio set in the window recess, a complicated thing of bulbs and dials.

"Father bought it. It's a valve-set." She rose and turned a switch. I had been starved of seeing a girl's frock flutter about her calves. The music came out of a thing like a gramophone-table beside the dresser. It was "Love is on my Trail".

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Oh, don't bother about *him*." She didn't return to her seat, but stood behind my chair. "You like him, don't you?"

"Well, he's a character." I put my plate down.

"A character!" she said. "He wakes me in the morning with the word 'bitch'. I have to lock my door. He used to hit me before I threw a plate at him. He spends days without speaking to me. At other times he's a maniac."

I rose and put my arm round her shoulder. She trembled. When I had first held her in my arms I had thought that I should never again feel a bliss so terrifying, but this was worse.

I said: "Do you remember how beastly cold it was!"

She lifted her eyes to mine and nodded her head.

Our relationship had entered its clinical phase. The risks we ran were fantastic. Our behaviour was that of idiots, and I cannot explain it, because I don't understand it. By way of example, Charlotte was never able to tell me why Snyder's intervention had caused her to swing back to me.

Charlotte and I returned to the kitchen to find the light in the valve burning low and a hoarse whisper discoursing on rites and fetishes of the jungle. She switched the thing off and came back to bury her head in my chest, saying: "Oh, Harry, Harry, take care of me!"

"What are you afraid of?"

We stood for a long time still and silent in the dark kitchen, drawing courage from one another in the face of things we did not comprehend.

On the following evening we had decided not to meet. I had in fact sat down to write—occasionally during the winter I had taken pen to set down a song or two. But the restlessness of my blood made me put on hat and coat and go walking the streets. Inevitably I found myself outside Charlotte's house. It was in darkness, except that when I had stolen round to the back I saw a glimmer of light behind the curtains of Charlotte's room. A mad idea seized me. I remembered how the Donaldson woman had walked in by the back door. I tried it and found it unlocked. The house was in silence. I opened the kitchen door and went into the hall. For all I knew I should meet the captain on his way downstairs, but I did not. I scratched with my nail on Charlotte's door and heard her bed creak.

" Who is it ? " she whispered.

" Harry."

She unlocked and opened the door and began to laugh. Her first words were : " You've still got your hat on ! "

I don't know how long I stayed. Charlotte wouldn't stop laughing, but I was afraid, not of an accident like meeting her father, but of the power that forced me to such lunacies.

She said : " You can't come here every night."

" Easter's not far off. What are you doing ? "

" Someone's invited me to Salisbury, a school friend."

" Refuse it, and tell your father you've accepted. I'll find an hotel somewhere."

She was silent. The word " hotel " placed our personal secret in the columns of the Sunday newspapers. " I couldn't do that," she murmured, and then clung to me, saying : " What's happened to us, Harry ? "

I escaped without mischance. If the neighbours noticed me, they feared the captain too much to say anything. I should have welcomed the chance of hearing anyone impeach his daughter's chastity to his face. On this occasion I had turned into the main road when I saw him stumping up from the station. He ought to have been home three hours before. . . .

Our most likely source of betrayal lay in Charlotte herself. No one could fail to notice a faint relaxation of manner and the new bloom upon her cheeks.

Holland walked home with me one evening. There was to be a concert at the town hall—one of the newly organized International Celebrity Concerts, at which Chaliapine was to appear. It was a fine spring evening, with the sky a rich duck-egg blue, and a couple of starlings shouted at one another across the house-tops. We called at an A.B.C. for tea, and when we came out the shop-blinds were down and everyone was pouring along the pavements with the evening light on their faces.

We had seen little of one another since the dance. I said: "Will, if it's not too much of a confidence, did you ever speak to Miss Rhode?"

"Yes. I asked her to marry me."

"You've got a nerve. When?"

"At the dance, while she was bandaging my hand."

"So that was it! She was nearly in tears. I didn't think she was capable of them."

"She was in tears. That's what makes me know I'm right. She just said: 'I can't,' and started to cry. There's a mystery somewhere. Probably it's Snyder."

"I don't understand. Why are you right?"

"She loves me, that's all."

"I take off my hat to you. I didn't believe she'd got emotion of any sort inside her."

Holland took me seriously. He asked: "Didn't you? Have you noticed her lately?"

"No."

"Then you're blind. She's in love. I know it by the way she avoids having anything to do with me."

I began to whistle, and bought a paper at a street corner. "Have you seen this? Dr. Webster's taking this new Swedish soprano, Asta someone, to the States. Striking-looking piece."

Holland said after a pause: "One of my narrowest shaves was Marjorie. I've no real regard for her. Some fools persist in believing that money means independence. I must have been mad."

"Doesn't money mean independence?"

He made no reply but looked at me and snorted. Then he said: "I don't like being left in the air. How shall I get her to forgive me?"

"Oh, write her another damned letter!" His egotism was beginning to annoy me. All the same, I was much too bound up with him to quarrel with him.

We had taken our places in the hall and were waiting for the great man to appear while the North London Symphony Orchestra banged its way through the "Siege of Corinth", when I whispered: "Will, I could never make out why you didn't try for an exhibition that would have taken you to study at Rome or Paris."

His answer came with the hand-clapping. "You see the leader down there, and the conductor? They both won exhibitions." Chaliapine made his first appearance amid a storm of applause. "But him—he learned his trade wandering round Russia with a cheap opera company."

3

Charlotte's private feeling for me remained a mystery, but I did not doubt that she was in the grip of the same morbid fascination as I. We fell into a state almost approaching hate, but, notwithstanding this, she whispered to me at the office: "I'm free for Easter."

I felt myself committed. I don't like lies, and foresaw a net of them. How does one take away a girl for a week-end?

Where to ? Surely conventions attached to the custom ! I was ignorant what they were. Reminiscences of hotels at Clacton, Princes Risboro' and in the Strand recurred to me from literature. One evening I entered the call-box that stands at the corner of High Street and Union Street, Watford, and put through a call to the Hampton Court hotel where my father had taken Charlotte and me to tea. They accepted the booking without question. I walked down the High Street feeling that I had put my hand to robbing the Bank of England.

My next step was to put my father off. I would much rather have gone with him to Brighton than with Charlotte to Hampton Court. Charlotte would rely upon me for everything, even to directions as to how much marmalade she might have for breakfast. But nothing intervened to prevent me. About eight on the evening before Easter Saturday I entered a phone-box and traced him from his hotel and club to his office, where he was putting in over-time that would free him for the week-end.

I said : " Father, it's off. I can't come. I'm terribly upset." The agitation in my voice was genuine.

" Whatever's the matter, old man ? "

" It's Charlotte. You know what these women are."

" Are you reunited ? "

" Yes. She's shockingly emotional under all that frigidity. She's got a father, too."

" What about him ? "

I had wanted to leave the explanation vague. I said : " He's an old sea captain, with one leg shot off in the war. He's devoted his life to her. She lost her mother when she was eleven or so."

" Can't she leave him ? Is that it ? "

" Yes. He's a bit touchy. . . . I can't tell you how sorry——"

" But, dammit, boy, the two of you can't stay in Watford all day ! Bring her with you, just for a day—back on Sunday. I can fix a room for her. I'd like to see her again——"

I said desperately: "Father!"

He grunted into the receiver: "Oh, all right," and hung up.

In the morning I had an expressed letter from him, but could only imagine that it was filled with reproaches, and stuffed it into my pocket unopened. A far more urgent missive occupied me, a card from Marjorie imploring me to meet her that morning at ten, outside Harrow Station. I use the word "imploring" to describe the following:

> "Must see you, darling, news frantic. I can only rely on you, do meet me——" and the place and time.

It was fortunate for me that I had not arranged to meet Charlotte at Victoria until eleven.

Carrying a suit-case, I was outside Harrow Station before ten, but found her already waiting, with the family Rover parked behind her. She was of the sort who arrives early for appointments out of anxiety to see what happens at them. She looked beautiful. I asked myself why it wasn't her I was taking to some legitimate rendezvous, at leisure and with an easy mind.

She did not want me to kiss her and we shook hands. She said: "You poor dear! Where were you going?"

"To Brighton with my father."

"I've spoiled things for you! I ought to have guessed——"

"Nothing of the sort. I telephoned him and we are taking a later train, that's all."

"You darling! I've never met him. I am sure he's all you say. Look, I'm wearing your silly ring."

She had removed her glove and was twisting the cracker-ring on her little finger. We walked into the station.

I asked: "What's happened?"

"Oh, it's awful—I had to see you. You know Daddy's run off with this Swedish woman, do you—the singer?"

I stood aghast. It was incredible. That marvellous home! That family of girls! Abandoned? But, good God, what for!

What black art lay in anyone to wreak such a disaster? I put down my case and said: "Marjorie, what can I do——?"

She said: "Oh, it's not so bad as that. Mother's guessed for some time. She'll get a settlement. Anyhow, she has a little money of her own. I shall help her, if the solicitors will let me. Mummy tied up the money just so that I shouldn't help her—that is, anyone whom Daddy married after her. But, of course, I shall. It's not that—look at this."

She took a blue envelope from her hand-bag and gave it to me. I recognized the hand-writing as Dr. Webster's. Inside was a letter that read:

"DEAR MARJORIE,

"Wilshaw, who's he? Marry whom you like. You're old enough. Your sincere father,

LLOYD J. WEBSTER."

I said: "Fancy, he doesn't remember me."

Marjorie retrieved the letter and caught my hand. "I wrote to him after all. Do you mind? I simply had to. All this suspense and secrecy! Now——"

"Oh, gosh, Marjorie—we can be properly engaged!" The exclamation came before I knew what I was saying. Then I thought, could I not leave Charlotte to wait at Victoria? I need never see her again. Married to Marjorie, I need never again appear at Smith & Snelson's. But the idea had no sooner appeared than it was dismissed.

A confliction of thoughts was appearing on Marjorie's face. She allowed her hand to rest on mine as she said appealingly: "Would you mind frightfully if we didn't? I know it sounds awful, but at home things are in such a state. I'm the only one mother's got to rely on. It would seem too much like flight. When we get engaged, we shall get married. Harry——"

I said wistfully: "I should have thought that a small advertisement in *The Times* wouldn't harm. You're very precious to me, Marjorie."

She gulped, and her large eyes filled with tears. She took my arm and I pressed it. She said: "If you only knew how I longed to surround you with things—cushions, and a nice heaped fire and a trollyful of tea-things! Doesn't it sound silly? But that's how I picture us. Only—mother's not terribly well. She's grown silent and won't talk to anyone. I mustn't go yet. And there's something else."

She glanced wildly round her. The look brought out all my protectiveness. In Marjorie it signified a feeling of being lost and looking for help. I murmured: "Come now, tell me. At least I will help you all I can."

She replied: "David's in the *Sea-holly*."

"Sea-holly?"

"Don't you understand? The submarine."

I remembered seeing in the evening papers of the day before that the Navy's experimental submarine, the *Sea-holly*, had gone down in the Firth of Clyde and not reappeared.

I said: "How's Juliet taking it?"

"Oh, a kid like that won't believe it." She glanced at the clock and said: "Oughtn't you to fly? I want to be with you. Why shouldn't I go to Victoria with you! My goodness——"

Before I could protest she had gone to the booking-office. She cried: "Come along. There's a train just coming in. Isn't this funny! With that case of yours I feel as though we're off for the week-end. Isn't it naughty!"

We scrambled into a train just on the move. With Marjorie one always knew that one was alive. She was chattering in high excitement, and not a male passenger failed to glance at her. I felt that Harry Wilshaw had gone far enough in arranging to spend a week-end with one girl, and finding himself in the train with another.

She said: "Juliet's pretending that nothing has happened. I can't forgive myself. I was wild with jealousy when she got engaged. Did you notice? Now I feel that it's all my fault. I can't do enough for the poor thing. She's scared, inside herself. I thought I knew her, but already she's changed. A child like that, hurt ! "

" They generally manage to get them out. Think of all the brains and resources being brought to bear upon that one spot," I replied. " Marjorie, about Holland. Do you think you could forgive him—pretend he'd never sent you that letter, if you met him ? "

" Of course ! I should love to. Then he could come and see Mother. I'll pretend the post went astray or something. I say, isn't this exciting ! I know it's exciting because those stations are just shooting past. Finchley Road ! I wish I could go on forever flashing in and out of Finchley Road with you."

We pressed hands. I was on the point of suggesting that she should go the rest of the way with me instead of Charlotte.

She went on : " Such a shame, we're having to cut expenses. Two of the older ones are leaving school. Louise thinks she can get a job as a night-club singer, or something awful. She's sixteen. Grandfather's nurse will have to go, and he's terribly attached to her. I wish Mother would let me pay—— Shall I be able to meet your father ? "

I replied firmly : " No. For one thing he'll be in the bar. For another, you've left that Rover car unattended."

" Oh, my goodness, the car—— ! "

She made no further protest and, as Baker Street involved changing, we parted there. I kissed her warmly and noticed a tear springing to her eyes as she gave my hand a farewell squeeze.

4

At the last minute the captain had wanted to insist on seeing Charlotte into a Salisbury train, and her efforts to get away made her late. In fact, for ten minutes I had believed she wasn't coming. The rush, when she did arrive, took away an obligation to kiss her, and helped to occupy a vacuum of unreality.

I ought to have been filled with excitement, but meeting

Marjorie had left me depressed. The contrast with Charlotte, sitting silent and white-faced, was too obvious. My bad temper reached its climax as we were drawing into Hampton Court Station when I took a ring from an inside pocket saying, "Here, you'll need this. Put it on the third finger of your left hand."

But her meekness as she did so, withdrawing a pair of new gloves, made me relent, and I bent down and kissed her cheek.

I had got from Charlotte the idea that we were caught up in something inevitable, like a train that was bound to carry us by a prescribed route to an inescapable destination. By her silence she always threw the responsibility onto others. Now this silence became mine. The woman at the reception-desk was forced to ask me my business several times. I thought: Whatever she tells me is her concern, I am not compelled to listen. With the same absurd idea I followed a porter upstairs thinking: you're taking us and the responsibility is yours.

The hotel named its rooms instead of numbering them. Ours was called "Jane Seymour". It was small, and filled with oak furniture. At least, I thought, we can make a small home for ourselves round the gas-radiator.

When the porter had gone, I lighted it and sat on the bed near it, looking out of the window. We were not even facing the river, but overlooked a damp yard filled with an old green gate, a heap of wine bottles without corks, a broken pump and a chimney cowl. Under our room was a horse which stood motionless for hours and then banged the ground with a hind hoof.

It was the last degree of wretchedness. . . . I didn't know what Charlotte was doing and absolved myself of responsibility for her by not turning to look. I stuffed my hands into my pockets and found my father's letter, doubtless telling me how inconsiderate I was.

I opened the letter and it read:

" MY DEAR HARRY.

" I am afraid I shut off a bit hastily just now—do forgive an old man. Of course, you must do whatever your little girl wishes. It is one of the laws of nature that I followed at your age, and to which I must now bow my head. Enjoy yourselves, and if you need help or only a spot of cash, don't forget to apply to your loving

FATHER."

Sunlight seemed to flood my heart. I turned round and found that Charlotte hadn't even taken off her hat but was standing staring over the bed and out of the window. She said : " Isn't this dreadful ! I want to cry."

I sprang round the bed and exclaimed : " No, it's going to be all right. You're cold. Look, it's lunch-time. We'll have a drink. You'll soon be yourself."

A telephone was standing on the bedside table. I had myself put onto the woman at the reception-desk and said : " Look here, this room you've given us doesn't overlook the river. It's what we came for. My wife——"

An indignant voice protested : " But, sir, that's exactly what I was trying to tell you ! I can give you one of the front rooms with pleasure. It's a bit more, that's all."

" Send the man up and let's have it. By the way——"

" Sir ? "

" See that I'm not given one of Henry VIII's wives, will you ! "

When I turned round Charlotte was laughing. She said : " That's like you, Harry ! " We embraced and kissed. The girl was shivering, and even her lips were cold. We moved into a wide, spacious room in white and gilt, with a broad window-seat and a hearth where we might have a fire. It was called " Catherine Parr ", who at least had died naturally. A waiter brought us two whiskies. It was Charlotte's introduction to whisky. She coughed and went red in the face and said she hoped that week-end to do everything she'd never before had the chance of doing. We went downstairs to the long, low-ceilinged restaurant and occupied the same table we had occupied with my father. By the end of lunch she was laughing. No doubt we were taken for a honeymoon couple.

In the afternoon we crossed to the Palace and explored the kitchens and the State Apartments. Among the throng of Easter holidaymakers we lost our feeling of guilt, and clasped hands like lovers. We came to the Palace front and sat down by the Carp pond. Suddenly I saw Wolfe and Molly. I pretended not to see them and they, too, pretended not to have seen me. Dusk fell. We had tea in a cheap and dirty place along the Roehampton Road that served to show us how comfortable our room was, when we had returned to it.

A gala dance was billed to take place at the hotel that evening. Charlotte had foreseen such a chance and had packed the evening frock of coffee-coloured lace that she had worn at the office dance.

A chambermaid had lighted the fire and beside it I did up the frock's twenty-eight ridiculous little buttons. We heard the band strike up, and descended, but the ball-room was empty. We waltzed into the midst of the floor with only four or five couples watching us, and gave up after a couple of dances. Then I was obliged one by one to undo the twenty-eight buttons. The band seemed to go on all night, punctuated by resounding clumps as the horse in the stable stamped its hoof.

I slept badly, probably because I was unused to a feather mattress, and woke at an early hour out of a nightmare in which I was ill and forced to stay forever in the " Jane Seymour" room. The feeling of the dream persisted as I lay waiting for dawn to break, until I was convinced, by the fantastic images floating before my eyes, that I had measles. At last I dared to turn. Charlotte slept on. As light gradually wove itself into the fabric of the curtains I lay gazing at her face, childlike and helpless, with a lock of hair falling across the cheek.

I went to sleep again and woke refreshed. Charlotte was still sleeping. As I slipped out of bed a shaft of yellow sunlight fell upon her breast. The moment was so poignant that I could not stir. I realized the delicacy of her sex and the greatness of the mystery with which I was trifling. Then the gleam faded and I shrugged on a dressing-gown and went to rake out the hearth.

Presently a lazy voice asked: "What are you doing?"

"Making the fire. There's a gas-poker."

I washed my hands and went to sit on the bed, holding her hand.

"I was looking at you, asleep," I said.

"Unfair."

We smiled at one another. I began to wonder if I were not falling in love with her.

She said: "Gosh, a cup of tea!"

I lifted the telephone receiver and obtained promise of tea in ten minutes, to be followed in thirty by breakfast. She had turned over and was smiling to herself. I had the impression that under the stress of experience she was at last sloughing off her passivity.

I asked: "What's the joke?"

"Oh, nothing. Snyder."

"Good heavens, Snyder!"

"I never told you what he said to me that evening." She began to titter. "He can't ever have spoken to a girl before, apart from business." The titters were renewed. "It was really dreadful. I didn't know where to look."

"You looked as though a tram-conductor were asking for your fare. What did he say?"

"He said he had taken a flat at Mortlake and if I'd go and live in it he'd give me anything I wanted—ten pounds a week, twelve pounds—money didn't matter."

"Just like that?"

"In the open office. I felt sorry for him. He was squirming with nervousness. I didn't say anything at all. I called you."

Her titters began again, and I began to laugh, too. Just then the tea was brought in. We were still laughing when the maid had gone. I said: “That’s the penalty you pay for being Snyder. Holland would talk about Nemesis.”

I knew that I had made a mistake in mentioning Holland’s name. The sparkle left her face. I said: “Things are so strange that I daren’t even kiss you now.”

She looked away. “Did Snyder say anything to you in the morning?”

“That wouldn’t be like him. I picked the right moment to say: ‘Snyder, Miss Rhode put me on the spot last night. I couldn’t very well refuse to take her home.’ He didn’t say anything, just grunted. I knew he was dying to ask whether you had told me anything. I said: ‘I don’t believe she opened her mouth once, except to say she must buy a pair of kippers.’”

“What did he say then?”

“‘I want two thousand of the leather-stitch circular run off this morning’.”

The maid had tucked a newspaper between the tea-cups. While drinking my tea I picked the paper up and flattened it on my lap. A scare head-line read: “*Sea-holly* men: all hope abandoned.” I returned the paper to the tray without comment.

Charlotte said: “I’ve a feeling he won’t want to see more of me now. Nor of you.”

She handed me the tray and I rose to put it on the window-seat. When I turned round she was sitting with open neck bunching up her hair. I was afraid, and looked away. There was something in those Victorian conventions after all.

She said: “How do you feel this morning, Harry?”

“I had beastly dreams. How do you?”

She lay back and curled herself in the bed-clothes. “Beautiful. I’ve lost all my bad dreams. I want this feeling to go on for ever.”

“Love me?” She made no reply and I took my seat beside her. " Charlotte, are you going to marry me ? " She still did not answer. I leaned over her and whispered : " Charlotte."

She replied : " Don't spoil it, Harry."

" I never know what you're thinking."

" Nothing. I never think anything."

I wouldn't believe her. Nowadays I believe she was right. But then it was the enigma in her that drove me to pursue her. I said : " Charlotte, you'll have to marry me. I can't do without you. I shall go mad."

She laughed. I began to feel angry. I had made a mistake in mentioning Holland's name.

I appealed to her again : " Charlotte ! " and was patient, remembering that she found expression difficult and had serious and conflicting thoughts to convey.

She said at last : " If you only knew how refreshing it is to see a man with two legs."

I gave up and went to take the gas-poker out of the fire. Whilst I was so engaged, she said : " You know you'd hate to marry me, Harry."

" Then why this ? "

She was still lying curled among the sheets.

" Besides, you must long to be married."

She was silent, stirred restlessly and said at last : " I don't know why this. Don't be cross with me, Harry. Let's just be ourselves."

I went and put my arm round her and kissed her. I said : " Do you mean it ? Listen, about the summer holidays, I've got an idea. Would you like to go to Llandudno ? Mother's got a house there. It wouldn't cost us more than the train-fare. Charlotte——"

A knock came at the door, and our breakfast was brought in. The feeling of friendliness gradually receded. I have often thought that those thirty minutes were the only revelation of the real Charlotte she ever gave me. They were my glimpse of the normal married state, a tramp's key-hole view of a summer garden.

When breakfast was over I shaved and dressed while Charlotte read the paper. Then I went downstairs to the lounge, where I wrote the following letter:

"MY DEAR MOTHER,

"I am writing this as much at Father's wish as at my own. I don't like being at odds with you. I just can't stand Uncle Crawshay, and a detached view of my childhood has made me feel that Ethel and Gwennie weren't very kind. You were away so much, and couldn't see. But can't I come to visit you—I mean *you*? I don't want for money, but I have to keep my job, of course. Since abandoning the old ideas about music (they were never *my* ideas) I have been infinitely happier. Don't be surprised if I tell you that I have met a really sweet girl—one who works, too, at my present office. I should like you to meet her. Have you still got the Llandudno house? If so, I might bring Charlotte with me for the summer holiday fortnight, if dates fit. I am very anxious to speak to you about Father. I'm not at all repentant for being myself, but will you forgive your affectionate son,

"HARRY."

As I addressed the envelope, I thought: "That's pretty straightforward," and rose to find Charlotte waiting for me, encased in her vacuity as in a suit of armour.

We did not recapture our harmony and the rest of the holiday became a desert of boredom. In the afternoon I fell asleep in an arm-chair, and on the Monday was desperate enough to take Charlotte back to town and visit the Tower of London. Charlotte paid half the hotel bill because otherwise, she said, she would feel like a female.

I was relieved to get back to the office and drove away a cloud of illness and discomfort with hard work. I don't suppose I spoke twice to Charlotte during the following fortnight, except about business.

CHAPTER NINE

I

SINCE coming to London the advent of spring had never failed to depress me. As it came, each spring was a warning fainter than the last. . . . Harry, you're wasting time. Harry, you're making a mess of things.

A graph in Snyder's office, to which I added monthly, showed that April and May gave the largest turnover next to that of December. I was forced from my desk to help with returns, goods sent back by people who refused to be hoodwinked. Snyder managed to whittle these down by two-thirds, leaving only twenty or thirty dead loss. I was left with these to make a last attempt upon the customers' common sense. Then Snyder took them. . . .

Meanwhile I carried out my routine work and as well, that year, set in motion a new scheme of Snyder's, whereby regular customers were invited to advance five pounds and take whatever we sent them. In return they would obtain a cut of ten per cent. It entailed searching every index file and all the senior girls and men were put to the task, after hours. About seven o'clock Snelson brought us jugs of hot coffee and baskets of ham rolls, and we knocked off at eight-thirty.

In the process, many missing cards came to light and many others were found to be out of place. A typical incident arose from this. When the supervising filing clerk was called by Snyder to answer for the errors, she had the nerve to say that it was all one could expect in an office like a wreck on the Goodwins. She then dragged aside one of the Snelson-made filing cabinets to show a hole in the wall through which we saw a patch of waste ground, on which a young couple were hugging one another, thirty feet below. There were other holes : in the floor, the walls and the ceiling. This filing corner caught the north-east winds and was the draughtiest in the building.

The recognized procedure followed, and Snyder took the girl's part and spoke sternly to me for not having reported the matter. I had of course reported the matter *ad nauseam* both to him and Snelson. When the girl had left he came sidling round to me, tapping me on the shoulder. " Hee, hee ! The place's falling to bits under us, Wilshaw. Why don't you buy a hammer and a penn'orth of tacks ? " And more earnestly : " We shall have to get rid of that young woman."

That night I saw nothing funny to laugh at, and was glad when I got outside to find Holland waiting for me. He said : " Supper ? " and I replied : " If I murdered Snyder I'd subpoena you and that filing girl to show justifiable homicide."

We walked in silence all the way into Watford until we came to an eating-house that Holland liked, behind the court-house. By that time I had regained my temper, and the steamy air, smelling of fried sausages, comforted me. We sank facing one another into a wooden pew and shouted orders for fish, chips and peas to the stout woman behind the counter.

I asked : " Why do you enjoy this sort of place ? "

" *Vie de Bohéme*," he replied. It was one of his rare jokes.

The place was almost empty. It contained a dozen pews, in pairs with a gangway between. Round the walls hung large mirrors advertising cigarettes and soft drinks ; on one of them the bill of fare was written in white, a choice between fish and chips, cow's heel, saveloys and sausages. Across the gangway two factory girls were studying a picture of Valentino, one of them scraping a shred of meat from between her teeth with a stained finger-nail. Our plates rattled up in a hand-lift, the woman called : " Two fish and chips ! " and we rose and fetched them.

Holland's first words were: "Why didn't you tell me that you were engaged to Marjorie?"

I conveyed a forkful of fish to my mouth before I replied: "It was her secret as well as mine."

"I looked a bigger fool than usual."

"But I put in a word for you!"

"I need never have sent the cursed letter. Usually you're only too keen on opening your trap."

He had put down his fork and was staring at me. I hoped that I should never have to face him when he was angry. I replied: "It took place at Christmas, after you'd sent the letter. I would have shouted about it, but Marjorie didn't want a soul to know. She still doesn't."

He mumbled: "Safe with me. Congratulations."

After a few minutes, I said: "So you've been to the Websters'! What's Mrs. Webster like?"

"Much the same."

"You've heard?" He nodded his head. I went on: "What about Juliet?"

Holland said: "I saw Juliet. They're worried stiff about her because she goes round as usual, without mentioning Lord David. I thought she was thinner, that's all."

"I wonder what's going on inside her."

"Nothing. This business of Dr. Webster has unsettled them all. Louise has joined a London cabaret. Two of the others want to buy a farm in Essex."

His lawyer's voice conveyed its own dry commentary. Suddenly he leaned across and said: "Mrs. Webster has found me another job."

I looked at him with envy. I couldn't bear to think of his going over my head. I asked: "Locally?"

"Regent Street. Manucke's, the piano people. They want someone with academic knowledge of music who can also keep a ledger or two and be polite to customers. My stiff collar's my only recommendation."

I saw him fulfilling the job perfectly. I also saw that I myself might have done so. " Much in it ? "

" Eight-ten a week. Also commission."

My envy turned to bile. I laid down knife and fork, unable to eat. Holland did not raise his head. I rose and went to the counter and asked for a cup of tea. While there, I heard Holland say : " Bring me one, Harry." Usually he called me Wilshaw. When I had brought the two cups back and sat down again he pushed three-ha'pence across to me and said :

" I'm not taking it. Mrs. Webster has agreed that you should go after it instead."

I was dumb.

After two or three minutes he said : " I suggested it because I owed you for finding me the Smith & Snelson job." He raised his hand to silence me. " I don't forget these things."

I said : " But Will—Will, why on earth aren't you taking it ? "

By this time he had pushed away an empty plate and was straightening the fork between his massive fingers. All the cutlery in that place was leaden and bent under pressure. From his early days he had retained the habit of sucking his teeth and he sucked them then, looked across at me and shrugged his shoulders.

I said : " Charlotte ? "

He nodded, laid the fork down and said : " I should lose touch with her. It wouldn't do. I need her and she needs me."

I said irritably : " Here's a girl you know nothing about who won't even talk to you——"

He leaned back and said calmly : " I can read her soul. Cigarette ? "

This, I reflected, was the Slav in him. No Englishman can utter the word " soul " without feeling self-conscious. Holland said it as though he were saying : " I can read the evening newspaper." I accepted a cigarette, lighted his and mine, and said: " Go on with you."

He replied: " Something's happening to her I don't understand. She's distressed. I was never more certain of anything than that she loves me. A look is enough. She'll marry me."

A guffaw broke from me. I replied: " You talk like a bloody palmist."

He rose, and the two factory girls turned to look at him. He said: " Manucke's want someone straight away. Go as soon as you can, ask for Mr. Wilson and say that Mrs. Webster sent you." He even smiled.

We went outside and walked along the wet and dingy street, aware that the two factory girls were following us, talking loudly and with little screams of laughter. I whispered mischievously to Holland: " Let's pick 'em up."

" All right."

I turned round and said to them: " Coming home with us, Susie?"

The street was dark and they were only sixteen or so. They took fright like deer and scuttled past us with shrill squeals. We heard them laughing half-way down the High Street. When we had turned the corner we found them relating their fearsome experience to a knot of youths, who fell silent as we approached and backed among the glass caverns of a tailor's arcade. Without Holland's bulk beside me I might have felt nervous.

When the danger was past he said: " I hope you'll always find someone to pull you out of your scrapes, Harry."

We parted at the station and I walked home tingling with excitement about Manucke's. I thought it immensely funny that Holland should have to stay at Smith & Snelson's because he wanted Charlotte, whereas I could afford to leave because she was already mine. Every aspect of the situation was ripe with the humour I liked in life.

2

By good luck Snyder sent me to Clerkenwell two days later on the track of twelve gross Illinois wrist-watches, fire-salvage, and I was able to call on Mr. Wilson.

Working with Snyder, I had come to class mankind broadly as either crooks or honest men, and had forgotten the minor vanities that distinguish the latter. Mr. Wilson was of small, neat build, and foxy-looking. At first he received me in a well-furnished office partitioned from the shop by panes of frosted glass, but later he took me to lunch at the Albany Club.

His pride in Manucke's and his pleasure in himself were, to me, a novel experience. Matthieu Manucke's were a Zurich firm and called themselves " the Piano People " only for the sake of euphony, for they sold to the entire orchestra. In a small and specialized way, where business interests were involved, they also undertook publishing. He himself was general director in the British Isles, with five branches to care for and a new one to open in Belfast. He had studied under Hubert Parry and two small things of his had been published by Novello's. His home was at Hampstead and he showed me a photograph of it, and a photograph, too, of his small boys, Elgar and Vaughan.

I had always understood that prospective employers sought to impress, rather than be impressed.

We returned to the office. I tried to tell him of my own career in music, but he remarked: " I know. Mrs. Webster has told me that you are bound some day to make a great name." I demurred, but he waved me into silence. I wanted to tell him of my upbringing, and he frowned. " You have had a hard life," he said. " Wasn't your father—ah—— ? "

" My father's a commercial traveller in Holborn," I replied. " You mean my grandfather, Sir Richard Wilshaw."

He raised his eyebrows, impressed. " I thought Mrs.

Webster told me—but Sir Richard! Did you know that we were the first publishers of the *Agony*?"

My grandfather's name clinched it. I imagined his saying at his club: "Amusing to think, Professor, that in my chief assistant I have the grandson of Sir Richard Wilshaw! You will remember that we were the first publishers . . ."

He began to show me round the shop. Pianos, harps, 'cellos and the larger instruments occupied the ground floor, and arrays of violins, brass and silver wind instruments the basement. All was carpeted, with palms disposed at intervals, and there was no possibility of my pulling aside a piano to disclose a hole in the wall and a couple locked in one another's arms behind it.

We stopped among the drums, which were humming softly to themselves under the beat of London's traffic, and he began to tell me that a clerk was employed to do the book-keeping, and two caretakers, a middle-aged couple from Poland, to do the cleaning and polishing. The manager must be prepared to live in the top-floor flat, to which the burglar alarm was wired, the first and second floors being let to a firm of turf accountants.

He went on: "It would gratify me to think that you could begin soon. I am compelled to serve in the shop myself."

I replied: "Possibly within ten days, Mr. Wilson. May I ask what happened to your last manager?"

"Ah, poor fellow, the monotony was too much for him. He left to direct a dance-hall. We have no great bustle of custom. The firm's policy has always been to attract the highest class—soon we shall have to take rooms in Bond Street. Regent Street is not what it was."

I thought of Smith & Snelson's, and felt that Regent Street would pass for the time being. He made me understand that the premises were really a necessary window-dressing to a complex business transacted behind the scenes by musicians who would otherwise starve, a commission of ten per cent being allowed on the generality of purchases, such as violins and flutes, seven and a half per cent on pianos and two and a half per cent on organs.

"But then," Mr. Wilson said, "organs will rarely come within your province. Ecclesiastical authorities are putting their money into house property rather than organs, whilst the cinema circuits, which are giving us increasingly satisfactory returns, are the special care of M. Matthieu Manucke *fils*."

He almost bowed as he uttered the name.

Throughout the interview he had assumed that I should accept the position—had called in fact only to introduce myself. The salary Holland had mentioned was confirmed, and a nominal rent of twenty-six pounds per annum named for the flat above. On parting he promised to send me a letter confirming the appointment.

"Apart from the Websters, Mr. Wilshaw, I can see that we shall get on splendidly," he said, shaking my hand, and hesitated before adding: "As one composer to another, let me express the hope that your dark days are over."

I was in the street before I realized that I had been given the job on the strength of Mrs. Webster's description of Holland.

I felt that I could afford time to visit my father. He was at his office desk, wrangling with the contractors engaged to erect his firm's booth at Wembley. I noticed that the walls were more and more covered with French masterpieces.

"Would you credit it," he cried, banging down the receiver. "Six years after the war's over they're trying to tell me there's a world shortage of nails!"

My news cheered him at a timely moment. I thought he looked tired and depressed. We walked across to the Fearon bar and had three Scotches each. He said: "Now you've no excuse for not marrying that little girl of yours."

I replied: "It's got two bedrooms. We'll make a home for you after all these years of hotel life."

He laughed at the idea, but I saw that it had pleased him.

I had telephoned Snyder to say that I was delayed, but it was past five-thirty and the over-time team was busy before I reached Smith & Snelson's. The three Scotches had made me remember that I had not spoken to Charlotte in eight weeks. In a flood of compassion I had borrowed a fiver from my father and bought a gold wristlet-watch that compensated me for the trash I had bought by the gross in the morning.

I found Snyder patrolling the office and worrying about me.

He exclaimed : " Ha ! Wilshaw. Have you bought them ? What about delivery ? Did you suggest two and a half per cent for cash ? "

We entered his office and shut the door. Smoking was permitted after hours and I lighted a cigarette. Snyder didn't smoke. I often had to remind myself that he was only twenty-seven. It was only with me that he dared be abrupt, and now he said : " Why are you late ? "

" I was getting myself another job."

It was like Snyder to realize the uselessness of protest. In any case he loathed scenes because he couldn't handle them. We held an unspoken conversation in which I told him that after three weeks of over-time I had had no scruple in taking some of the firm's time, and in which he told me that decency required me to give him four weeks' notice.

But Snyder went beyond all this. His reply was his masterpiece. He said : " What exactly did Miss Rhode tell you that evening ? "

I laughed out loud. Even he smiled. I said : " Why, that you had made her a business proposition she couldn't accept."

We were now talking in confidential murmurs. He said : " You should have told me that before. I wouldn't have fired you. Did she say why she couldn't accept ? "

" Why ? Why on earth do you think why ! "

" I mean, should I have made it twenty pounds a week—or twenty-five pounds ? "

I knew how useless it was to argue, but I made a brave try. I replied with surprise : " But, Snyder, she's a decent girl, not a——"

I didn't utter the word. He brushed me aside. " Fa, fa ! Nothing's without its price. Next time I shall gild it a bit more."

I cried : " Next time ? My dear chap, she's——" I was baffled and tried again. " Let me tell you her father's a sea captain with one leg, a regular pirate. She keeps house for him, and, although he bitches and blackguards her round the house, she's the apple of his eye."

" How do you know ? "

" She asked me inside. I stayed to tea. I was never so terrified at a tea-table before. No wonder she's like that."

He turned aside, smiling his no-smile. " All the more reason why she will accept." Pathetically for Snyder, he asked : " Aren't I good-looking enough ? " I had never thought about it, but saw that he was. He walked a step or two round the office and asked : " When are you leaving ? "

" Monday next."

He replied softly : " You know that's impossible, Wilshaw. Make it four weeks' time. I shan't easily replace you."

I replied equally softly : " Do me a favour, Snyder. After all, I've done you a good many. Let me leave on Monday."

Our gaze met and he said at last : " All right."

After our confidences he must afford to be gracious.

I gave him the facts of the fire-salvage transaction and left to join the others, without having disclosed anything of my new appointment. As I sank into a chair beside Holland and drew a box of indices towards me I whispered : " Got it, Will." He threw me a glance and continued with his work.

Holland grudged this robbing of his writing-hours more than any of the girls grudged their hours at the cinema.

When the work was done for the night and the others departed, I followed him to his desk and occupied his typist's stool while he tidied papers. He was abstracted and appeared not to want to hear details. One or two remarks were, however, forced from him. He said: "If you're going to marry Marjorie, why take a new job?" And when I was describing how I had heard the drums vibrating, an idea seemed to strike him, for he asked: "Did you notice it in any other instruments?"

"The exhibition grand, which had its lid up, in the window, and the harps."

"Those drums must have been left tightened up."

He scribbled a note on the back of an envelope, which he stuffed into his breast pocket. I never had his confirmation, but undoubtedly this was the origin of the fantasia called *Nursery Piece: A Night in a Drum Shop*, memorable for its thudding of muffled drums, that was given its first airing at the 1937 Proms.[1]

On leaving the office, I was sure that he wanted to be rid of me, but stuck with him out of pique. We took the bus into Watford and only once did he break silence. "One of my nightmares is being surrounded by a silent orchestra. You are going to be paid to spend your life in one."

We parted at the bus-stop, but before letting him go I said: "Will, let me give you a tip about Miss Rhode." He hesitated and I added: "Have you thought that the trouble with her might be Snyder?"

He moved off as though he had not heard.

It was about this date that I received Mother's reply to my letter of reconciliation. It was written on office notepaper with the address crossed through and the home address substituted:

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[1] More probable this, I fancy, than the much-quoted story of the bout of malaria contracted by the composer in Africa! — but cf. Eric Blom & Grove.

"MY DEAR HARRY,

"I was glad to have your letter from the Hampton Court hotel, although I do not remember ever having been 'at odds' with you. You are my son and I am your mother, and nothing can alter the fact. I am planning to spend all July at Llandudno and can find room for you and your Charlotte, if her parents approve. However, I cannot guarantee that you will not find either Ethel there or Crawshay, or even both. Gwennie of course is married. I recommend you to send a similar letter to her, although I can tell you that her home is no holiday resort.

"Under separate cover I am sending you six handkerchiefs.

"With love from your affectionate
"MOTHER."

Much as I loved my mother, her influence has given me a suspicion of clever women. This letter is an example of her methods. One has to read it four or five times to appreciate: one, that she mistrusted my staying at a Hampton Court hotel over Easter; two, that she would not take responsibility for Charlotte; three, that Uncle Crawshay and Ethel must be given opportunity to form their own opinions of Charlotte; four, that she knew my real purpose in writing was to get a cheap holiday; five—but, the number of hints is indefinite.

She was not to know, however, that her letter had put me in a quandary. The idea of spending a whole fortnight in Charlotte's company now filled me with dismay, even without Ethel and Uncle Crawshay as onlookers. Why, when only a couple of months previously I had ached for her? I had not the faintest notion. I looked upon my feelings for her as one would look upon an eccentric chemical reaction, as though the electrolysis of water would produce hydrogen and oxygen in April, but not in June. I was sorry, and felt that I ought still to ache for her. While checking figures with her I would think: "This is the mouth I kissed, and those the arms that went round my neck," and desolation would fill me.

Whether Charlotte felt the same aversion, or was hurt and perplexed, or didn't mind one way or the other, I did not know. With Charlotte, one never knew. It was this enigma in her that had lured me on, and was luring Holland and Snyder.

Purchase of the gold wristlet-watch had decided me to visit her on the evening of the Saturday I left Smith & Snelson's, whether I found the captain in or not, when Charlotte herself wrecked the idea by inviting me. It is one thing generously to offer, and another humbly to accept. I replied: "Thanks, but I'm going to the Palladium with my father."

"Father told me to ask you."

Tenderness began to steal back. I mumbled: "I suppose I ought to. I've something to show him." We were in her cabin at the time, and I laid my mother's letter in front of her. She read it, returned it without comment and recommenced calling out figures.

3

In the afternoon I visited Regent Street to pick up what I could of my new duties and take possession of the flat. I should have been excited, but was sad. I found that I hated leaving Smith & Snelson's and that Snyder's character had not oppressed but fascinated me. Shaking hands with Holland was painful. In Charlotte I was leaving part of my life, and the situation between Holland, Snyder and Charlotte was likely to become dramatic.

However, I was consoled by an ex-lag, one of the packers, who told me that he had longed to be back in his cell for a week after leaving Wormwood Scrubs.

My father joined me for an hour or two, met Mr. Wilson and looked over the flat. This comprised four rooms and a small kitchen, and for the most part had been furnished by the firm. Items like cutlery and linen, that were not provided, my father promised to obtain from fellow-travellers who dealt in those things. I met the caretaker and his wife and arranged for the latter to cook my breakfasts. Nothing could have been happier, even though Mr. Wilson's attitude towards my father left no doubt that he thought pianos two or three degrees socially superior to public conveniences.

When my father and I left to take tea together, I felt that he was as depressed as I, and not wholly because a panel of the sunken bath to be erected at Wembley had arrived cracked.

We found a side-street Lyons and sat facing one another across a glass-topped table spilled with crumbs and tea. He was silent, and I opened an evening paper. The *Sea-holly* had at last been found and brought to the surface. Investigations showed that young Lord Gannet had gone to certain death in an attempt to force by hand the faulty valves that had caused the tragedy. A leader spoke of heroism, the finest traditions of the Service, and the ineptitude of the Admiralty. I mentioned this to my father.

"There's a young fellow engaged to a pretty girl with all the world before him," he replied. "A heroic death is all very well, but one of the main objects in this life is to keep alive, however obscurely."

This was so unlike him that I said: "Father, I wish you'd tell me what's wrong."

He hesitated, then burst out: "Confound it, I may as well tell you. It's Molly. You remember that business at Bow Street? It was all useless—farcical. I knew it at the time. The night before last she was lifted on a clear case of soliciting. A couple of detectives tailed her over an hour. In that time she got away with a Dutchman, who wasn't good enough evidence because he didn't know English conventions, and a boy from Peckham Grammar School. Imagine it! I refused to intervene. She has the soul of a whore. It's the only explanation. Doesn't need the money. I've known her pass from Wolfe to me and back again in the course of a week—a night." He almost spat, but instead allowed the waitress to hand us our tea, then said: "I don't know what the hell it is makes me so fond of her."

I allowed him to take his first sip of tea.

"All that may be true, but she's fond of you, too."

"How do you know?"

"She phoned to tell me you were ill. She also pointed out that you were growing old and needed some better home than an hotel."

He finished his tea with a gulp. "It's a fact. I do."

I took out Mother's letter and showed it to him. He pursed his lips, read it and returned it. The same thought passed between us, that if I could return to the fold so might he. He commented: "I never found that it worked to go back to something you've proved a failure." Suddenly a wave of pity rose within me, and I stretched my hand across the table to lay it on his arm.

"You know, old man, I'm glad I met you."

He smiled for the first time, and took my arm as we rose and went out. He had made up his mind to go to Wembley, but hated leaving me. We stood on the kerbside chatting until no further excuse could be found for staying, when I saw him onto a bus to Baker Street.

I returned to the shop where I already walked with a proprietorial air. On Monday I should be in sole charge, because Mr. Wilson was then travelling to Eire. I found him writing a report to Zurich, and went for a tour of the premises alone, to see what it was like.

Traffic on Saturdays is not so heavy as on week-days and the drums were silent. Down there in the basement the violas, the violins and the 'cellos were lying still as death in their plush-lined coffins, while the wood-wind instruments had been arranged by my predecessor in patterns like the pistols in the Guard Room at Hampton Court. The shadows, the exact positions, the motionless palms, were all taking on identity. I saw them as I should see them in three months' time—in three years—unsold, for exhibition only. An orchestra doomed to perpetual silence! I remembered Holland's nightmare and knew that it was real and that I was in the middle of it. I had set out to be a composer, and this was where I had arrived. The extent of my powers was to have charge of these instruments, and sometimes sell them to people possessing the power to go out and make music with them.

I returned upstairs with carpeted footsteps, thinking: "By God, if I stay here another minute I shall go mad!" It was a relief to hear the scratching of Mr. Wilson's pen. I went to the window and felt like a goldfish in a bowl and returned to the back of the shop, where silence waited on me. I told myself: "Harry, you're sold and parcelled up for life."

4

At the back of the mind I had wondered all afternoon why I was specially invited to the Rhodes' in the evening, and was on my way there when I remembered that it was Charlotte's birthday. The thought did not endear me to her. It reminded me that she was five years older than I, a fact which had always confirmed my indifference to her, when I had felt indifferent. Now it gave me a new idea, that as well as leaving Smith & Snelson's I might leave her. No more raptures, no more incomprehensible hatreds! Let her represent my wild oats, and let me end the nightmare of Manucke's by marrying Marjorie.

When I had knocked at the door and Charlotte had opened it, I saw the folly of reason. The porch-light fell upon her hair, her breast, and the pom-poms of her crimson slippers.

"Charlotte!"

She held out her hand and I drew her into the house's shadow and kissed her. She stroked my cheek and whispered: "Harry, Harry!" I said to myself:

"Idiot!"

The captain was sitting in the back room as I had first seen him, in his shirt-sleeves with one leg extended, another leaning against the mantelpiece, and a jug of cold water within easy reach. Usage had overcome fear, and my intoxication was such that I entered the room with my arm round Charlotte's waist.

I said: "Well, Captain, I've got a new job!"

He put down his book and shouted: "What?"

"New job!"

He picked up his book again, bawling: "Bloody fine. Now you can get married."

I produced the gold watch and gave it to Charlotte, let her unwrap the parcel and click open the velvet case. She was delighted, and raised herself on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. We were disturbed by a roar from the captain: "I never thought Charlotte'd ever raise the spunk to kiss a man!"

Charlotte left the room, shutting the door behind her. I went over to the captain, who peered at me with bloodshot eyes over the top of his book. I was never more conscious of the difficulty of speaking through a wall of deafness. I pointed to the door and shouted: "Asked Charlotte to marry me!" He cocked his head in enquiry and I shook my head in reply.

"Christ, why not!"

I shouted: "Not yet!"

He replied obscurely: "She's got the whole of the bloody house. God knows I only want this chair and a corner for my bed." He slapped his book fiercely and shouted: "I'll make her see sense!"

Inside me a voice said: "That's finished it, Harry!" I felt that I had better leave him before I said more, flourished my mother's letter and left him to read it.

I found Charlotte seated at the kitchen table with her head in her arms. I put my hand on her shoulder, and in one movement she rose and put her arms round me with her wet cheek against mine, whispering: "Oh, Harry, I thought it was all finished!" But it was useless to comfort her because merely the touch of her warm sleeve under my hand excited me.

I gave her my handkerchief and turned on the wireless, and we bustled round the kitchen collecting supper-things, chattering about the new job.

I said: " A marvellous thing, radio. Beecham's conducting Beethoven's third Piano Concerto in half an hour."

Charlotte replied: " They're just a lot of noise to me, those symphonies. But I like listening to the news."

I hurried over my supper because I wanted to hear Beecham, and the captain, too, was anxious to return to his book, a new assessment of the breeding and rearing of livestock, in which, by much reading, he was expert. He made no mention of the letter, probably because he wanted first to speak with Charlotte. There was no time to wash up. Charlotte took up a basket of sewing and went to sit with her father, while I placed a straw-bottomed chair by the kitchen-stove and waited for the concert to begin.

The overture, one of the Leonoras, was well started when the door quietly opened and Charlotte appeared with her basket of sewing. I was occupying the only comfortable chair in the kitchen, and rose. She whispered: " I won't disturb you." I was warned of internal conflict by the pinched look in the corners of her eyes. She was laying her sewing down when I put my hand on her arm.

" What's the old devil been saying ? "

" He t-told me come in here and sit on your knee."

She looked at me and began to smile. The pinched look vanished as I took her in my arms and kissed her. I asked: " Did he say anything about the letter ? "

She produced it from her apron pocket and gave it to me. " Only to go, and let myself rip."

I choked with laughter. She, too, laughed. The straw-bottomed stool fell over, and I tripped and put my hand on the hot stove. We laughed hysterically. The same impossible notion of letting ourselves rip there and then had occurred to both of us and was immediately rejected, and immediately returned with irresistible force. I was appalled and quickly disentangled myself, saying: "Here, this won't do," and went to sit on a bentwood chair beside the loudspeaker. Charlotte picked up the straw-bottomed chair and began to sew.

Sir Thomas tapped his baton and the brilliant scales and cadenzas began. I was starved of music as I might have been starved of bread. It was like honeyed whisky trickling down the throat, soothing the chest and dispelling warmth throughout the system. This, I thought, was all that Manucke's was not.

My eyes fell on the patient stoop of Charlotte's neck and I was exasperated. I foresaw that marriage with Charlotte meant an endless succession of such evenings, squeezed into a corner watching her sewing, with the captain camped in the back parlour and the washing-up still to do.

Worse still, the wireless began to fade. The 'cellos howled in a manner certainly not sponsored by Sir Thomas and the piano waxed fainter and louder without reference to the pedals. I drew my chair nearer to the loudspeaker in an effort of concentration. . . . Suddenly Charlotte's voice broke in: "What an awful smell of vinegar!"

I pushed my chair back, crying: "Damn!"

"I think the battery's leaking!"

I went across to her and kissed the nape of her neck as I had wanted to kiss it for ten minutes. She bit off a thread and said: "You haven't seen what Father gave me—a dressing-table set. It's in my room."

I wondered out of factual curiosity whether she had been wording the last sentence since sitting down. Suddenly she rose, spilling a pair of scissors, which we both stooped to retrieve. I found myself trembling, and thought: "No, you can't do it!" and went back to the wireless to switch it off. If you gave the battery a rest it sometimes gathered a little strength. When I turned round she was on the point of leaving the kitchen, but with her head turned towards me.

I asked: "Must I come with you?"

She would never be forced into decision, and replied: " If you like."

I followed, not minding very much whether the captain heard or not, and we went upstairs. After all, he'd sent her in to me. I would not be made responsible. And when I whispered to Charlotte, as she lay in my arms with the house grown suddenly silent about us: " You know, Charlotte, this is utter lunacy," she replied:

" All right. It's lunacy."

All the time the memory of what I was missing in the concerto haunted me. Tremendous chords clashed in my head, and waves of supporting orchestration poured in behind them. I returned downstairs with a feeling of remorse and desolation. When I turned on the radio only a few whines and squeaks could be heard, but in any case the concerto had been finished long before. It was like a parable. Charlotte was still upstairs. I felt that I couldn't face her again. Tenderness still filled me, but repugnance was so inevitable that I chose to be gone.

I was putting on my overcoat in the hall when the parlour door opened and the captain appeared. I had forgotten about him, and his unexpectedness was so grotesque that I laughed.

He asked: " What the hell's so funny ? "

I went up to him and shouted: " Going home ! "

He bawled: " Home ? I told the damned girl to keep you amused."

As I let myself out by the front door he was leaning across the banisters shouting upstairs: " What the blazes are you up to, driving the chap out of doors ? " and from the street I heard his voice: ". . . ruined the whole bloody evening."

I wanted to laugh, but the ability failed me.

CHAPTER TEN

I

I SAW IN my early youth that life describes itself by contradiction. The most frightening instance of this was the summer holiday I spent with Charlotte at Llandudno. I relate it factually, out of duty, to show the nature of the thing that had fastened upon us.

Manucke's kept me tied to Regent Street more closely than Mr. Wilson had made out, and I had spoken to Charlotte only once, by phone, between her birthday and the time of my meeting her at Euston to take her to Trentham. Musicians prefer irregular hours. I sold them fiddles and piccolos at ten at night and two o'clock on Sunday afternoon. I was once roused at four in the morning by a celebrated Spaniard in need of a guitar-string. My working hours themselves were a desert of idleness.

Apart from this, I tried to forget Charlotte. I did not, as sometimes before, actively dislike her. I was only scared of her, and humiliated that she should have this power over me. I wished that the holiday had not been arranged, but its approach hypnotised me. When it was a fortnight away I telephoned to her hoping that she had forgotten, but no, she replied that Snyder had been pressing her to decide which fortnight she wanted, and the twelfth to the twenty-sixth would do nicely. We arranged a rendezvous, and I put the receiver down in despair.

Tied as I was to Manucke's, I had seen nothing of Marjorie for weeks. I had, however, received a characteristic post-card telling me that she had taken the children to Tankerton while Mrs. Webster was settling affairs at home. At least, I need not concern myself that I should meet her on the very morning of my taking Charlotte away.

My cheeks creased into an unwilling smile when I saw Charlotte standing, neat and composed, beside her suit-case, and one of Ethel's spinsterish sayings recurred to me, that all brides went away in blue tailor-made costumes. Self-consciously we shook hands. I took my place beside her in the train, thinking: "I've got a fortnight of this", and entrusted to a bundle of periodicals the duty of entertaining her for the first three hours. But she chiefly gazed out of the window, wondering perhaps why she was going and why I was taking her, or more probably wondering about nothing at all.

I had arranged with mother that Charlotte and I should stay the first night at home and travel with her by road to Llandudno. The excitement of new faces and surroundings took away much of my responsibility for Charlotte. In my happiness at returning home and in exercising a manly indifference to what my family thought of me, I forgot about her. I rushed upstairs to my attic, examined my old treasures and flung open the window to gaze my fill of the verdant slopes of King's Ridge and Clayton.

I had forgotten how small and pretty Mother was, and how soft her cheek. I went outside to the stables and there found Uncle Crawshay in his shirt-sleeves strapping a wicker skip and other luggage to the back of a large open Lancia Benz. The pony had gone the way of all flesh. I shook his hand, delighted to see him. All my life I had gone in fear of people like him and Captain Rhode, until I found how pathetic they looked in undress.

I returned inside to find Ethel blunting the edge of her curiosity on Charlotte's passivity. After three years' absence, custom made me greet my sister by popping in at the door, saying: "Hello, are you there?" and popping out again. She still filled me with dislike, and the old paradox occurred of how a woman with a bosom like a feather mattress could be so virile.

After supper I went to look up boyhood friends and returned from the Trentham Hotel about eleven to be told that Charlotte had been given Gwennie's old room and gone to bed. But I had known that she would need no protection: her passivity had the merit of walling her about with safety, even at home.

Ethel had taken pity on Charlotte. I had told myself that they would mingle as easily as oil and water, but in practice they conferred in corners with feminine murmurs of interest.

Ethel and I sat on either side of her in the back seat of the Lancia, and we did not speak a word together throughout the journey. For that reason alone it was memorable: ninety miles, or five hours, of silent dislike is a feat. Apart from which, it was a tiresome ride. Mother had bought an open car because she liked fresh air, but sat in the front seat out of the draught swathed in a veil of purple muslin. We in the back were buffeted by the winds and dust of four counties.

We halted at Chester for coffee. Uncle Crawshay remarked on the rigours of driving and asked if I would care to take the wheel. Ethel at once said: "Oh, no, he mustn't," and I replied that I couldn't drive. We returned to the car, and I continued for the rest of the way pressed against Charlotte in unrelenting hatred.

Although a daily maid was attached to Mother's house, a great deal of housework was called for on our arrival. In the afternoon, while Uncle Crawshay rested, Ethel was sent with Charlotte to the shops, and Mother took me to help her make beds.

By custom, the hour of bed-making had always been one of confession. Our working in unison, face to face and alone, promoted confidence. I was stooping over Mother's bed when I said: "I don't know what the blazes to do about Charlotte."

Mother gave a guarded: "Why?"

"Bringing her's been a mistake. We've got nothing in common. She's a nice girl, but she bores me stiff."

Mother held a pillow under her chin and wriggled a slip round it and said: "I'm glad you told me. I've been surprised, but then I never professed to understand these things." She smacked the pillow and smoothed it. "What's your father say about her?"

I had come prepared to champion my father, and at once took the offensive. "He likes her. She's pretty, and has no brains."

"I wouldn't say that," Mother replied. "Any girl who can hold a responsible post has brains." We tucked in the bottom. "Have you been seeing much of him?"

"Yes. I like him more than anyone in the world."

It was always futile to argue with Mother. She laughed. "There's no need to cut my throat, Harry. I thought the same for seventeen years."

We moved out of her room into the adjoining one, which was mine. It was the best room in the house, spacious and with a double bed and many familiar things—a toy yacht, a portrait of Chopin, a Chaucer, and an "Idylls of the King", both the latter much scribbled over and dog-eared.

I carried in blankets and linen, and said: "He's getting on."

"We all are. I'm sleeping badly. Your uncle's got an ulcerated stomach."

"Father's in need of a home—womenfolk to look after him. What's to become of him?"

Mother replied softly: "My dear, he has always done as he chooses." She waited for me to smooth the sheets before tucking in. "Ethel has quite taken to Charlotte."

Irritated with my lack of success, I answered: "Yes, it's the man in her. Like me, she's looking for Charlotte's secret, and there isn't one."

"I was wondering whether to put them together, but perhaps it wouldn't be fair on Ethel. I'll put Charlotte in the little room."

We returned to the landing, I took sheets and blankets out of the straw skip, and we entered the little room. It was on the same floor, but at the top of three steps, next to the bathroom. Charlotte was to be given a creaking cane bed and a view of a chemist's back-yard.

I pulled the bed away from the wall, inserted myself into the resulting cat-walk and turned the mattress over, observing that most of the tufts were missing. I asked: "What's happened to Gwennie?"

"She's married."

"But why this silence about her?"

"She's a fool. Always was. She's married the wrong type."

I laughed, and Mother said: "Please don't laugh."

"You're up to your old game of sitting in judgment. Father never blames nor praises."

"All right. You wait till you've seen Gwennie's husband."

I whistled the air of the old ballad: "Oh, No, We Never Mention Her." We finished with Charlotte's bed, and took sheets and blankets up to the attics, one of which was Ethel's. I stood at the small window taking in draughts of salt air and enjoying the view of the pier, the yachts, the busy sands and the green corner of Happy Valley. I said: "It's grand. I feel like a little boy again, panting to get out with bucket and spade."

The firm maternal voice behind me said: "I am glad you came. But I still think that if you'd put your mind to it you'd have made more of yourself."

In the evening Mother and I walked to the foot of the Orme. I was proud and touched to have her take my arm. The tide was out and we returned along the firm sands. She told me of the latest advancements in the cause of Penal Reform, and that this and total abstinence from liquor were essential to a Christian way of life. She described the people of the Potteries as a race of savages dwelling in kennels, their life a state of fear, their pleasures the pub and bodily lusts.

They were the familiar themes of my boyhood, and filled me with a sweet nostalgia.

2

I entered upon my holiday as though Charlotte were not there, resolved upon finding the strongest contrast to the atmosphere of Manucke's in the heat, strong air and sight of far horizons. Most of my time was spent with Uncle Crawshay. He had wide and unusual scholarship, swam well and was fond of flying kites. He drove me into the Welsh mountains, and once, when thirty miles from his sister, I induced him to enter a village tavern where he not only drank beer but told me a smutty story that I have never cared to repeat.

Sometimes we met Charlotte in the streets or saw her on the beach, with or without Ethel. Mother entrusted Charlotte with the shopping, took her one evening to see the Arcadians, and was sufficiently impressed by her to suggest that when Smith & Snelson's failed, she should take a post with Penal Reform.

Quite suddenly, on the night of Tuesday in the second week, I woke about one in the morning remembering that Charlotte lay in the next room. The physical sensation—a prickling of the skin and trembling of the limbs—was akin to that of food-poisoning, after swallowing tainted lobster for supper. I felt ill. I sat up in bed and fought with the enormity of the idea. I also remembered that Mother was a light sleeper and wedged her door open at night. I lay down again and shut my eyes, and suddenly sprang out of bed and opened my door quickly and noiselessly, as I had learned in boyhood. Barefooted, I glided along the landing and up the three steps, and stood with my hand on the knob of Charlotte's door, listening. Perhaps she had locked the door. My advent might startle her. In any case, even I could not be bounder enough. I stood there sweating and trembling for three minutes before I loosed my hold on the knob, returned to my room and almost instantly fell asleep.

I woke in the brilliant light of morning scoffing at my nightmare.

In the afternoon Uncle Crawshay took Mother and Ethel to visit friends at Bettws. I was sitting on the beach dribbling sand through my fingers and reading *Sard Harker* when I saw Charlotte sitting twenty yards lower down, gazing out to sea. She turned her head, and our eyes met. She smiled and I called " Hello ! " It was like meeting an old friend. I rose and went down to her.

" Let's take a walk to the Little Orme," I said.

I helped her to her feet. When we had finished with the promenade she slipped her hand inside my arm, and I was glad because the touch raised no special emotion. " Thank God," I thought ; " it's finished ! "

The discovery was so exciting that I talked freely to her. A steady, sand-laden breeze was blowing off the golf-links, and we took refuge from it in a blistered shelter. The tide was coming in, flustered by the off-shore wind and tossing flags of spray. We were both charmed to see a couple of shapely bathers emerge from behind a screen of umbrellas as nuns. Behind us, a small boy climbed over the back of the shelter, playing with pebbles and listening to our conversation.

I said : " Would you believe it, I crept along to your room last night. I actually had my hand on the door-knob. Then I went back to bed." And I laughed at the idea.

She asked : " Why ? "

" I thought you'd make a fuss."

She waved a hand and said : " Me ! "

I felt sorry for her as for any other lonely girl and took her back to the town, where we had tea. For the first time I felt that she might make a restful companion. When the others came back from Bettws we were playing draughts, but gave up because we were mildly bored with one another.

I went ordinarily to bed and to sleep, but woke at an indeterminate hour shaking with the old lunacy. . . . I had always known that I should so wake. I opened my door and heard the wind of the afternoon whispering through the house. Mother was gently snoring. I dared this time to open

Charlotte's door, and found her sleeping. She made me feel like the Caliph of Baghdad and I choked back a laugh. She woke with a fluttering of eyelids, and turned over, saying: "I'd forgotten abou you."

I kissed her eyelids saying: "Take pity on me. I had to come."

"I knew you would. It'll always be the same."

I flinch from recollection of the three days left to us. The daily scene was distorted by the senses so that nothing that wasn't animal had reality. I have sometimes thought that this bodily hysteria was necessary to both of us, a loosing of the restraints separately imposed on us from childhood until that time.

The other three ceased to exist. One leads several lives at once, and we remembered only at breakfast that Mother, Ethel and Uncle Crawshay also had part in one of ours.

It was not possible, for instance, that they lay awake when we lay awake, listening to the band and the shuffling feet of dancers in the basement of the private hotel across the street. Heat lay quaking in our narrow thoroughfare until a brisk breeze from the sea chased it out in the small hours. . . . The street noises climbed into our open window and the lamplight patterned our ceiling with long shadows. At a late hour girls were leaning their elbows upon window-sills listening to the music and the susurration of the tide. Some of the dancers came upstairs to sit on the steps outside, wiping their brows and conversing in low voices. There was always a knot of loungers silhouetted against the basement grating watching the fun within, the dancing and games, tapping their toes as they hummed: "Love is on my Trail".

We had the impression that this shadow show, with music off-stage, existed for us alone.

Disconnected remarks recur to me, as for instance when Charlotte said: "I don't feel at all wicked."

"Why should you?"

"You're supposed to, in these circumstances."

And she asked on another occasion: "Who's Marjorie?"

"One of the Webster girls. Why?"

"Mr. Holland says you see a lot of her. Yet you never mention her name."

Her attitude towards Ethel surprised me. She felt sorry for her. Ethel, she said, was envious of her because as a male I had chosen to seek her company. Charlotte said that Ethel's mannishness was an overcoat covering feminine frailty. Charlotte also said that Ethel had confided that as a boy I had picked my nose and should still be watched for irregularity of the bowels.

But the happiest insight Charlotte gave me was of Uncle Crawshay, when we were sitting innocently on the beach in the hour of relaxation that followed a bathe. She was still in costume and wrap, rubbing and tossing her hair before lighting a cigarette. Uncle Crawshay was swimming out to sea, breasting the waves like an Airedale. She began to laugh. She had been in her room, she said, taking off her things so as to put on her costume, when Uncle Crawshay had suddenly walked in, said: "I beg your pardon," and walked out again.

"And honestly," Charlotte said, "it was useless to pretend I had a stitch on."

I apologized again on behalf of the family, feeling sorry for St. John the Baptist. My mother, however, took a different view. I told her about it the same evening. She said grimly: "He did, did he! I'll speak to him."

"Why?" I asked. "He mistook Charlotte's room for the bathroom."

Mother turned to me with a hint of a smile. "That's charitable of you, Harry. But I remember similar incidents when Gwennie and Ethel were growing up."

About half an hour later I began to laugh. It was another childhood illusion gone. All the nice things I had been thinking about Uncle Crawshay vanished, and I saw him reduced to the same mortality as my father and myself. Typical of youth, I had no mercy. I gave Mother time to speak to him, and at lunch the following day said: "You'll never guess. Uncle Crawshay has agreed to forgive me the £340-odd I owe him. I think it's jolly sporting of him."

Uncle Crawshay raised his head and fixed his goat's eyes upon me, then returned them to his plate, defeated.

The last night of our stay was Saturday. Thought of Manucke's was beginning to oppress me. I had again asked Charlotte to marry me and she had again refused. The afflatus was dying and her company becoming a burden. After supper, Charlotte and I took a last walk along the promenade and parted at the foot of the stairs, without reluctance and almost without a word, she to make a fourth at whist and I to my room.

I was dropping off to sleep, having forgotten her, when she appeared like a ghost at my bedside. Hitherto I had always visited her room. The temptation offered itself and was wearily put aside. I wanted to go to sleep. I lifted the hem of her dressing-gown and kissed it, saying: "Charlotte, you're an angel."

The unexpectedness of life is said to be its beauty. Suddenly she sank to her knees and began to cry. I was aghast. I put out a hand to pat her shoulder and said: "What on earth's the matter?"

She lifted her distraught face to mine. Charlotte could never express herself. Between sobs she said: "I feel poorly."

"Is that all?"

She made an indefinite gesture with her hands and tried to check her tears. She said: "Harry——" and turned her face away. The tears began anew. I propped myself on an elbow and put my arm round her shoulder, but she flinched away.

"Is there anything I can do?"

She rose and threw me a glance of hatred. I was mystified. What had I done to make her hate me? She composed herself and presently went from the room. I lay down and closed my eyes, pretending that the incident had not happened. Across the street an altosax was putting feeling into "Love is on my Trail". I fell asleep.

Sometime later I was roused again, this time by Mother. In a coma of sleep I said irritably: "What's up?"

"Ethel says she hears noises every night. Have you been walking about the landing?"

"No. Tell her it's the hot-water cistern."

Probably mother was satisfied, for I was allowed to fall asleep again. That was almost the only night in the second week on which she would have found my room occupied.

My family intended to stay on for another three weeks, and I was therefore given Charlotte's society for a five hours' train journey. She made no reference to the scene of the night before. Indeed, it was impossible to conceive that our acquaintance had known any warmth. She was pale and silent. I was empty of feeling, and liverish.

By the time we arrived at Euston my feelings had worked round to pity. I insisted that she had tea, which we took in the main dining hall, and afterwards I saw her onto the suburban train for Watford. Even for Charlotte, she was constrained.

I said tenderly: "Feeling all right now?"

She nodded her head, but, as I thought, bit her lips to check tears. The whistle blew and, as it did so, she leaned forward and kissed my cheek, saying: "Good-bye, Harry."

I walked away with a relief that had a background of anxiety.

3

About three weeks later I received a letter from her saying that she was going to have a baby. No more, not even whether she had told her father. I was surprised, as I had not seriously considered the possibility. I folded the letter up with relief as though I were folding with it all my other plans for the future. All indecision had been taken from me, and I said to myself: "Well, that settles *that*."

The same morning I telephoned Smith & Snelson's, was put onto Snyder and was informed by him that Charlotte had left the firm's employ a week after returning from her holiday. I then telephoned her home—I telephoned it some half-dozen times over the next three days, but could obtain no reply. I was perturbed because I suspected that moves and crises were taking place behind the scenes in which she would need my support.

My thoughts were otherwise busy with Marjorie, and how I should break my engagement with her, when she burst into Manucke's only two days after my receiving Charlotte's letter. The month was August, the streets were empty and business was at a standstill. Both Mr. Wilson and the clerk, my assistant, were on holiday. A shimmer of scarlet appeared behind the glass door and, behold, it was Marjorie, dressed in a knee-length frock of red silk patterned with Jacobean birds-of-paradise, and wearing an absurd half-veil hat the size of a tea-saucer, also red.

I was delighted. We greeted one another effusively and walked into my office holding hands. A spate of pleasure, explanation and history poured from her. The Tankerton bungalow had been sold. She had just returned from Paris, her first visit, her first expression of freedom. The frock was marvellous and she had four more, equally terrific. Louise was living in sin with a band-leader. Juliet had one day disappeared without trace.

" My dear, the fuss! The police! We phoned to everyone. We thought she had drowned herself. But all the time she had gone into partnership with a Jewess in a hatshop. Yes, in Berkeley Square. I got this at it. You'd never know her. She's turned efficient, hard as nails, wears a serge two-piece——"

Suddenly she directed her attention upon me. How patient I had been, how swish my office, how pale my cheeks. She lifted a corner of the ridiculous veil so that I might kiss her, and spent ten minutes repairing the damage. She said : " Have you any money? Can you rob the safe and buy me a ring, the biggest one in the shop, to flash round?"

I had no answer and was silent. She was sparkling and all that was desirable. For so long she had been restrained, a governess to a large family of children, that she was revelling in the naughtiness and folly of spending money. No one knew better than she how outrageous was her costume. Now and then, by a deliberate cock of the head, she would transform herself into Nellie Wallace. I waited, thinking of marriage in a Watford register office and life in a suburban back street.

She said: "I felt I should never get free, but everything worked out for the best. Grandfather's going to marry her—yes, the nurse. Do you remember? He wouldn't be parted from her, and she was so expensive for Mother. There was a dreadful scene. I offered to pay her wages, but even then he said he'd prefer to marry her. She didn't seem to mind. He's got no money. We took it in turns to go upstairs and laugh. So they're married and she's now looking after the family. What's left of it. I'm free. We'll get married tomorrow. The solicitors say so."

The champagne of this discourse intoxicated both of us. The outcome was that for ten minutes I handed over the care of the shop to the woman caretaker while I accompanied Marjorie down Regent Street as far as the Mayfair Jewellers. There we considered rings at £800 and £1,000, but I secretly conveyed to Marjorie that the sum of my savings was barely £200, and she decided upon a diamond ring at a little under that figure. The shop knew her and the manager agreed to my formally placing the ring on her left hand. . . .

In the evening, long after she had departed and it was time to shut up shop, I took out my cheque-book to convince myself of what I had done. It was unforgivable. Yet, when I looked back, I could not imagine how I could have avoided it.

I made my supper of spaghetti, that being the cheapest meal I knew, in an Italian café in Rupert Street. It was crowded and dirty, cluttered with tarnished mirrors and baroque cupids. A girl with a lovely oval face, possibly a Greek, noticed my abstraction and came to seat herself at my table, where she rubbed her knee against mine. An idea occurred to me. I would go and see my father. The idea was so good that I asked for Chianti, and instructed the waiter to give the girl a glass, too.

My conscience was uneasy about my father. I had been on holiday and had since led a hermit's life, but it was no excuse for not going to see him. Time and again he had telephoned, my clerk had answered him, and I had pretended to be out. Each time the clerk had conscientiously written a slip and placed it on my blotter: " Please ring your father at Holborn——" There must have been eight such slips. But I had not wanted to speak to Father. He would have asked me about Charlotte, and made circuitous enquiries about Mother. They were both subjects I wanted to forget.

The Greek touched my hand, and I offered her a cigarette. Since Charlotte's letter I had smoked far too many cigarettes. I must limit myself to fifteen—no, ten a day. All I knew about Father was that he was resigned to forgoing his holidays, that Wembley was proving even more tiring than he had feared, and that he had been thrown into the society of other travellers who smoked and drank to excess.

I asked for coffee, and because the girl had smiled at me, I ordered another for her. I, too, began to smile, but it was with relief in the certainty that my father would tell me what to do. He had often prayed me to take my troubles to him and would never let me down.

I rose and shook my head as the girl looked up, reflecting how simply trouble presented itself by a rubbing of knees. Just as simply I had been led to seduce Charlotte and engage myself to Marjorie. The girl attempted to follow, and again I shook my head and said: " Another time." She smiled: " O.K."

When I arrived at the hotel, Jack, the hall-porter, advanced across the foyer and greeted me: "So they managed to find you, Mr. Wilshaw!"

His manner seemed artificial. I imagined that my father had again been hunting for me, and asked: "Is he in?"

The manager appeared at my side, my first intimation that something was on foot. He said: "May I have a word with you, Mr. Wilshaw?" smiled briefly and led me between palms into his office.

I knew by the way he shut the door that something was not merely on foot, but wrong. Life was always catching one on the wrong foot. I asked: "What's happened?"

He turned round and said: "I have something unpleasant to tell you, Mr. Wilshaw. I am sorry to tell you that your father died about an hour ago."

My mind was still full of Charlotte and Marjorie, and my first thought was: "He's let me down!" But I heard my voice saying some distance away: "Died? What of?"

The manager handed me a cigarette and lighted it. I had vowed to cut down my cigarettes. "No one knows," he replied. "He was at Wembley all day, but left early to keep an appointment with a doctor in Wimpole Street. This doctor had never seen him before and was therefore ignorant of his history. He sounded him thoroughly and passed him as moderately fit. Your father paid the fee, and was walking out of the house when he collapsed against the railings and died within five minutes."

The manager motioned me to a chair and I sat down. Shock is a strange thing. The system is unwilling to suffer damage and refutes anything likely to inflict it. Only some minutes later a contraction of the diaphragm betrayed that common sense has won and evidence been accepted. As soon as this happened within me, I laughed. The manager misunderstood me and was shocked. I was merely happy that contradiction did not hesitate to mock at death itself, and by way of farewell to my beloved dead I cried inwardly: "Bravo, Father!"

I asked: "Any theories?"

"I gather they suspect aneurism, the bursting of a blood vessel in the head. But that is really not my province." He walked slowly to the window and back again. I spared time to admire his finesse. He added: "It is very tragic. I foresee an inquest. You are his only son?"

I nodded my head and asked: "Where is he now?"

"Oh, upstairs."

I expressed a wish to see him, and the manager conducted me to the room personally. There were three doctors already present and I was perfunctorily introduced to each of them—the hotel doctor, who had probably known my father best, a young consultant attached to University College Hospital who was rapidly becoming his friend, and the unfortunate doctor of Wimpole Street on whose doorstep my father had died, a Hindu. It was like my father to ascribe special and mystic qualities to a Hindu.

They were not in the least interested in me and turned back to what I saw was a worried consultation. I barely restrained another impulse to laugh. Having always failed to get a doctor interested in him in life, my father was embarrassing three of them with his death. I noticed that they snapped at one another. Now and then one would break away to go over my father's assortment of patent medicines, to pick out a sample and sniff at it.

The hotel doctor said accusingly: "Digitalin! Your prescription, my dear sir!"

The U.C.H. man replied: "He didn't tell me he was already under treatment."

"I didn't give him details. He had a neurosis. It was inadvisable."

The chubby Hindu ventured to ask: "Then is it true he had a specific——?"

But he proceeded no further because the other two turned upon him with scowls. It had been his doorstep. I felt sorry for the Hindu and employed my authority as nearest relative to ask: "Yes. Can you tell me if my father really had any identifiable complaint?"

The hotel doctor replied sourly: "Blood-pressure. But so has everyone at sixty-five."

I was not to be browbeaten and replied: "More specific was the fact that he was fed up with everything."

Nobody considered this worth commenting on except the Hindu, who answered gently: "Yes, he told me that. You may be right."

They returned to their conference which, as an inquest was inevitable, could only amount to a process of getting their answers ready. I looked at my father. The doctors had thrown the sheet back from his face and I saw upon it the familiar expression of resignation to the buffets of fate. The Wellington nose projected beakily from blue cheeks and sunken sockets. Those last weeks at Wembley had taken it out of him. My heart wept and at the same time rejoiced. The old man seemed to have scored some kind of victory. Far from expressing indifference, the dead face held the last traces of an indulgent mockery. I understood that this was his last message to me and if I can be said to have made a silent vow over my father's corpse, it was that I undertook to continue the tradition.

Nothing was to be gained by remaining. We met Wolfe in the foyer, genuinely and deeply grieved. He shook my hand warmly and promised me all the help in his power, an offer I accepted with relief. We retired with the manager into his office and there fixed what details we could, Wolfe acting as arbiter between the doctors' desire to dissect my father, the manager's decently to rid the hotel of him, and the undertaker's to bury him.

Having told me exactly what I must do, Wolfe bulged forward like an octopus and said: "Harry, you remember that your father gave you the pottery horth and theven or eight pictureth, don't you?"

"Did he?"

"He did. The oneth in hith showroom. He told you in thith hotel on Christhmath Eve in my prethenth and that of Mith Roper. Yeth?"

"I remember."

"He told me privately that he intended them as a legathy to you. In his will you will find he leaves everything to hith wife." Wolfe became even more earnest. He continued: "They are yours. You can keep them or you can thell them. Now would you like me to thell them?"

It was unforgivable: I almost laughed again, wondering whether to ask what "perthentage" he wanted. But I remembered that the purchase of an engagement ring had that afternoon reduced my bank-balance to about seven pounds. Moreover, I had no use for a tailless Chinese horse. I said: "How much do you think they'll fetch?"

Wolfe shrugged his shoulders. "Like all thuch things, that depends whether I can find a purchather. Ten poundth, a hundred poundth, who knows?"

"Sell them."

Wolfe relaxed. "Very good. Thith gentleman will remember you have inthtructed me."

I might have sent the necessary telegrams from the hotel's post office, but I preferred to visit the one down the street. I'd had enough of the hotel. I also telephoned to Marjorie and asked her, with legitimate reason, to hold up notice of the engagement and postpone arrangements for the wedding. Perhaps, after all, my father had not let me down.

I wandered down Southampton Row into Kingsway, dwelling, like others before me, on the impermanence of human affairs. I had often thought of his hotel room as saturated with his character. When I had last seen it, occupied by his body and three doctors, all sense of character had gone, and it was again only an hotel bedroom. Nothing had moved me so much as sight of his keys and a few coppers lying on the dressing-table. They, too, instead of being warm with lying against Laurence Wilshaw's body, were merely keys and coppers. There was a half-empty bottle of Scotch in the wardrobe: the half that might have followed the other in warming his stomach would warm the stomach of a chambermaid.

Undeliberately I found myself again in Rupert Street. Inside the Italian café I found the Greek girl still sitting, though at a different table. She belonged to the world that existed before my father died, and I was gladdened by the sight of her. I asked for Chianti, and gave her a cigarette. She spoke very little. My body was bursting with emotion. I looked at her and she rose and, under the eyes of the *padrone*, led me outside and round the corner to a cheap tenement and upstairs to a neat little room in which, despite the August heat, a gas radiator was burning.

I don't know what she thought of me when I burst into tears, wetting her shoulder. Nor could I explain, for there is no explaining human behaviour.

4

The doctors agreed to call it aneurism, and death was officially attributed to natural causes. Mother, Ethel and Uncle Crawshay, together with half a dozen other relations, attended the funeral, which took place at Golders Green Crematorium. Gwennie was absent because nearing confinement.

Two notable incidents occurred after the ceremony. The first was that Wolfe thought the occasion appropriate for handing me an unsealed envelope containing his cheque for almost £2,600. He whispered: "I found a purchather waiting, a mutheum. Four of the pictureth were faketh, but in the world there ith only one other Chinethe horth like that one." And when I thanked him he replied: "Anything for Laurie Wilthaw's thon. I took two and a half."

The second incident rose out of Mother's asking: "Harry, who was that Jew I saw you talking to?"

"Father's best friend." I was bitter and offensive, because I felt that I was the only one present who mourned for Laurence

Wilshaw. True to their hard, intelligent creed, both my sister and mother showed faces to the world that were not merely composed but even cheerful.

In her loud, matter-of-fact voice Ethel remarked: "There was an awful woman in black crying her eyes out behind us. Who on earth was it?"

Ethel felt that only she and Mother might be allowed tears. I answered: "Father's mistress."

Mother answered quietly: "There was no need to have said that, Harry, especially at the funeral. Your father and I understood one another perfectly."

I had never succeeded in defeating Mother.

5

Ten days after the funeral I had further evidence that moves and crises were occurring behind the scenes in the form of a post-card from Charlotte that read:

"DEAR HARRY,

"I am sorry to have worried you. I was mistaken, after all.

"Yours sincerely
"C. R."

This placed me in a worse dilemma because I was tempted to believe it. Common sense told me to view it simply as a fresh move in whatever imbroglio was taking place. No trust could be placed in the written word. I could not believe that a girl so scrupulous with Smith & Snelson's ha'pennies could make so careless an error with her own person.

I spent a day of indecision, afraid on the one hand that Charlotte was suffering martyrdom and on the other that I should lose Marjorie. In the evening—and I do not wish to minimize the measure of my abnegation—I took train to Watford.

The first person I met outside the station was that ass, Severnake. He might have been waiting there for me ever since I left Smith & Snelson's. I had no desire to hear his gossip and, on the contrary, longed to see Charlotte before my spirit of self-sacrifice gave out. His smug face lit up, and he took a large white handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his spectacles, and squinted at me.

" My word, boy, that's a nice suit! Cushy job you're in. Selling pianos, aren't you? Got one on you?" He giggled. I had always disliked Severnake's giggle. He nudged me with his elbow. " You missed something, boy, leaving when you did. There haven't half been some goings-on."

" Have there?"

" I'm cashier now. How that girl managed to get through it all, I don't know."

" Girl?"

" Miss Rhode. Didn't you know she'd left?"

I made out that I hadn't, and he burst into a string of giggles, like bubbles out of a diver's helmet. All this time he had been holding by the hand a wriggling little girl whose face was lost in a deep bonnet. Suddenly she lifted her head and for the first time I saw her face. Compassion filled me. This was the premature child that in its earliest stages had been the cause of Servernake's dismissal and near imprisonment.

I said: " Let's go into the A.B.C. and give this imp some jam tarts."

He accepted willingly. In the café I took the child on my knee and raised no objection when she dipped her fingers into my coffee and sucked them. She was a restless, affectionate child, with mongoloid features. I thought that if Holland's philosophy of an exact Nemesis were true, here was a good illustration.

In return for the suggestion of tea, Severnake made his first confidence. When confiding, he dropped his voice and cupped his mouth, as though secret police were hiding under the table. " Between ourselves, I'm going. My old firm's taking me back. They say they want to be fair with me, but actually they can't find staff at the figure."

I hastened to congratulate him. He went on: "I'm getting out before I'm thrown out. The office is half-empty already. It makes you weep to see the empty desks, and card indices all over the place. Nobody cares. Holland's department packed up as soon as he went."

I exclaimed: "What—Holland went?"

He looked at me curiously. "Do you know *anything*?" I shook my head. He continued: "Not even that Snyder's gone?"

He shook me there. I gave a hoot of laughter and cried: "Snyder, too!"

Severnake leaned impressively forward: "You mean to tell me that you haven't heard about Holland? I thought he was a friend of yours."

"What's happened to him?"

"He's in quod, that's all. He's a man with a police record, an old Borstal boy. He got three months for beating Snyder up."

I was shocked, but tried to hide the fact. Apart from Holland, the words "police record" enraged me. Sunday-school teachers like Severnake, themselves with unspeakable pasts, used them to support every form of official tyranny. I replied with restraint: "We all wanted to beat Snyder up. Was there any particular reason?"

Severnake reverted to his mouth-cupping. "Everyone knew why. It wasn't coincidence that Miss Rhode left in a hurry. Snyder was sweet on her."

As a matter of form I replied: "Nonsense."

"It's an absolute fact. After you went I was his assistant for a spell. I'm the only one to know he sent her a letter . . . and, boy, what a letter!"

He lapsed into smothered giggles. If Severnake had seen in writing Snyder's proposals to Charlotte I could understand his giggling. I said: "So he was fool enough to put it in writing?"

Severnake became barely coherent. It was a good story and I was the only audience in the world able fully to understand it. He went on: "Not only that, but her father got hold of it, a fearful fellow with a beard and a wooden leg. He came up to the office one evening——" Severnake clapped a hand over his mouth to smother his joy. "There wasn't half a shemozzle. And when he'd finished with Snyder, Holland took over. I never realized before how strong Holland was. He picked Snyder up like a bag of flour and took him out to the waste ground behind the office and belted hell out of him."

Even I laughed. "Where was Snelson?"

"Snelson was standing in a doorway laughing his head off. When it was over he fired him."

"Holland?"

"No, Snyder. I wouldn't have missed it for a year's salary."

The child was becoming restive. Growing tired of putting her fingers in her mouth, she was trying to put them in mine. The waitress gave me the bill and Severnake started the usual polite squabble about paying for it. I replied that I was treating his child, not him, and stood up, saying: "So Snyder's only revenge was to charge Holland. Poor Will!"

Severnake sniggered. "At least, he's no need to look for work for a month or two. And when he comes out he's got a home waiting for him."

We walked out onto the pavement. "A home?" I asked.

"He's earned it, hasn't he! He took the blame for the damage the buccaneer did to Snyder, too. It turns out that all this time he's been in love with Miss Rhode, and she's married him."

I stood still and silent, trying to hide my feelings. My heart jumped like a lark that springs from the furrow to circle higher and higher, carolling. I felt a necessity to make a thank-offering, and pressed half a crown into the little girl's hand.

Severnake was hesitating. I suspected that he was concealing an even more fearful confidence. He put a hand to his mouth and whispered: "I don't like saying things behind a lady's back, but Miss Rhode—there's been a rumour or two of you-know-what. She certainly didn't look as though she'd come back from a holiday. It's always these quiet ones."

He looked sideways at me and the incipient snigger was stillborn. I said: "Don't you believe it."

Suddenly he began to talk loudly in an attempt to remove a bad impression. "Pity, in a way, all those empty desks. There's no heart in the place. You must take your hat off to Snyder. It'll be a garage again in six months. All that enterprise and busy-ness lost because he didn't know how to go about it. It's the revenge life takes on a chap, that's what I say."

We shook hands and parted. I went back to the station reflecting upon the revolutions and vicissitudes that attend all human affairs. The lark was still singing in my breast.

Three weeks later I married Marjorie at St. Mary's, on Harrow Hill, and after a month's honeymoon at San Remo we returned to the house she was providing for me at Stanmore.

END OF PART I

PART II

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

I AM STILL wondering whether circumstance, character, or Holland's Nemesis was responsible for the failure of our marriage. Or perhaps failure was inevitable because our mutual affection and respect were too strong for us.

One's body is constantly surprising. The likes and dislikes of my own change so swiftly that sometimes it might seem to belong to someone else. There's no catering for its vagaries. In my innocence I had assumed that carnal relations with one woman would amount to the same as carnal relations with another. Nothing of the sort. My body refused to recognize Marjorie. It was indifferent to the argument that relations with her were legal and with Charlotte were not. It rebelled against Marjorie, became frustrated and fell into something approaching impotence.

On our wedding-night, which passed in Paris on our way to the Riviera, Marjorie chose to sleep alone, on the grounds that medical advice recommended it after the excitement of the day. Privately I thought it improper that an anonymous body of men should interpose a theory between man and wife on their wedding night, but I laid my head on my pillow without argument and slept ten hours, for I was very tired.

I took even stronger objections to the further theory that a wife in her husband's arms is a martyr to that husband's brutal appetites. Marjorie consented to my embraces with the qualms of St. Cecilia going to her doom, and with a host of female safeguards and ceremonies.

This was different, I thought, from when I had gone scratching at Charlotte's door, though I did not bring the comparison to Marjorie's notice. Having made the effort, my body became indifferent. More, against all sense, it became filled with repugnance. I was helpless before its obstinacy. Poor Marjorie had had visions of children of her own, for, in spite of having had other people's children to rear all her life, she longed to rear her own. I had had the same visions.

When we arrived at our Stanmore home it was already haunted by the ghost of failure. We began with separate beds and ended with separate rooms, of which at least one was locked. My heart bled for her. She was disappointed, angry and ashamed, and I hated to see her hurt. It would not be too much to say that I loved her far more deeply after our marriage than before.

Many a happy marriage has been founded on other things than the marital union. Marjorie and I might have agreed that desire should not be allowed to injure our happiness, but I became possessed of an overpowering lassitude. Charlotte had burnt me out. I could not remember those agonizing days at Llandudno without shuddering. No, no—not that! Never again! I had done with love.

Marjorie was even more hurt by this than by my locked door. She had believed that she was marrying a jolly, energetic fellow who would help her to entertain her step-sisters and rouse their envy. Whereas when she looked out of her drawing-room window she saw an unshaven ruffian in list slippers and dressing-gown sitting on a deck-chair surrounded by fish-bones that the cat couldn't manage.

Apathy reigned supreme, as over most of the world. Only in one pursuit did I come alive, and that was for my own protection. I found in Marjorie's house a collection of musical instruments, a violin that I took pleasure in repairing, and a broken-down 'cello that I could do nothing with. The house had, of course, been Dr. Webster's after his first marriage. A neighbour's reminiscences of him as a young, thrusting fellow with no thoughts but of music, even in his spare time organizing chamber concerts among the residents of Stonegrove, caused me to turn out these old instruments, furbish them up, and organize my own chamber concerts.

Those old houses, facing the Leather Bottle on Watling Street, provided a perfect background for such activities. In summer there were lawns between high walls and with tall pear trees overhead in which starlings came to feast and chatter. Our own garden was ruled by a cedar under which a quintet might spend an innocent afternoon in worship of Schubert, with intervals for tea and lettuce sandwiches served by one of Marjorie's two maids.

In winter there were spacious drawing-rooms to choose from, each with its piano, each with its owner's particular taste for early English or late Italian composers, and each with its silver tea service, its cheese cakes and its muffins.

I saw no better illustration of the freemasonry existing among musicians than these gatherings. Socially, the performers had barely tolerated one another for years, or had grown out of that stage into one of Christian patience, but under the influence of Bach or Haydn they became a brotherhood—the doctor's wife; the barrister without a brief, but with ability on the piccolo; the two elderly sisters from High House; the young fellow from Edgware, who was studying harmony and counterpoint at the Kensington Academy; and one of the fair-haired Webster brood, Marion, a child of twelve, cycling over from the Hill when she could borrow a bicycle, simply to play the violin. They each had special reason, I suppose, for wishing to escape.

For myself, the afternoons were a retreat. Sawing away under the cedar, or tinkling the harpsichord in the front room, I remembered that at that moment Severnake was wondering whether he would be fired from Smith & Snelson's before he was given a post with his former employers, and that Manucke's clerk was wondering whether to take his fiftieth walk round the show-room before making tea.

I thought about Holland, and how powerful a quality was single-mindedness, and whether good conduct had got him out of prison yet. I had no doubt that he was the ideal prisoner, for, not only was he Holland, but he had Charlotte to get back to.

Sometimes, observing Marjorie's crimson hat moving above the muslin curtains of her bedroom, I wondered how many times she had been forced to listen to "Sheep may Safely Graze", from Bach's Birthday Cantata, when she had wanted me to take her to the more select *salons* of St. James's, or to Ascot.

Then I would be surprised at my own lack of enthusiasm for these things which, in Marjorie's company, would only twelve months previously have filled me with pleasure. I wondered whether those solemn Viennese doctors, whose case-books have already added to the world's comic literature, might have been interested in me and put a ferret into my sub-conscious with the idea of proving by what it brought back that my past sins had set up this or that complex. Or whether, like all doctors, having identified the complaint and labelled it, they would consider it cured.

I felt in no need of being cured. I found myself enjoying an interregnum in which desire had no place, although I did not think of it as an interregnum but as a perpetual sleep. I was confident that I should never again suffer the pangs that Charlotte had roused in me. Indeed, I felt immunized enough to feel sorry for those tormented souls not as philosophic as I was.

It was with interest as well as pleasure that about fifteen months after my marriage I heard of my sister Ethel's engagement, and accepted her invitation to the wedding.

2

Ben Truscott was a man like Holland in so far as he brought home to me that there was a wide world outside my own narrow orbit, not only geographically, for he was born in Canada, but mentally and morally as well. Ben first gave me the idea that my own drawing-room conventions may not be countenanced elsewhere—might not even be known. His outlook was so different as to make him seem more foreign than a Fiji islander.

To start with, I only knew that he was extraordinary because he was marrying Ethel. The first person from whom I could enquire further about him was my mother, whom I found seated in a faded cretonne-covered chair before an open window. I kissed her. " Who on earth is Ethel marrying ? "

She replied : " You'll meet him tomorrow," and, as a simple statement of fact, added : " I don't understand it."

I gathered from her silence that she would sooner not answer questions. She was not well enough to go to the wedding, which was to take place at Stoke Register Office. Uncle Crawshay was to give Ethel away. Gwennie was again on the point of being confined and would not be present. About a dozen people were coming to the reception. I asked : " Only a dozen ? " but received no answer.

Uncle Crawshay entered, with his usual neatness, placing his foot precisely in the middle of the doormat before standing precisely in the middle of the hearthrug. I thought he looked faded and of the past. We shook hands and smiled at one another. I had long since repaid him his debt, and we were once more friends. I said : " Well, this is the last of us to get married."

He said : " Yes, yes," without enthusiasm, and added ; " That's a nice overcoat you're wearing, but you're looking thinner. How's your wife ? "

They had, of course, all attended my wedding and met Marjorie. I understood them to think that she was far too good for me. Indeed, they thought the marriage incomprehensible, and would have given pounds to have had it explained to them.

I replied : " She's very well. She's gone with one of her sisters to Cornwall for the month, horse-riding."

Mother asked : " What happened to that nice little girl you brought with you to Llandudno ? "

" She married someone else, a friend of mine."

Uncle Crawshay exchanged glances with Mother. Apropos of nothing, she said : " I was never able to find anything wrong with that hot-water cistern."

It was the only criticism she ever made of my behaviour at Llandudno.

While we were having tea, Ethel came in, simmering with suppressed excitement. I watched her curiously, wondering how she would reconcile her life-long feminism with Ben Truscott. She affected to take my arrival as a matter of course and seated herself at the table, saying : " Why, here's the baby of the family ! Whatever have you come down for, Harry ? "

I would never recognize her affectations, and replied : " Where d'ye meet this fellow, Ethel ? "

" In the train."

" What train ? "

" Liverpool. He spoke to me. He was travelling to London, but changed at Crewe and came on to Stoke with me. On Stoke Station he asked me to marry him, and I accepted him."

Challenge lay in her words, and I had meanwhile observed tension gathering between Mother and Uncle Crawshay. I replied merely : " Unorthodox, wasn't it ? "

" Ben is like that."

I was nonplussed. I thought of Uncle Crawshay putting a prim foot in the middle of the mat, and Ethel, his favourite niece, accepting an offer of marriage on Stoke Station, and found the two irreconcilable. I reflected, however, that if it was a question of taking sides, I was on Ethel's, because she was of my generation. I thought it the best possible thing for her to get married, even to someone in her own line, a musician or dancing instructor. To show my good will, I said : " Speaking as a married man, Ethel, I'm very glad. What about your job ? "

" I shall keep it on. Ben's not doing anything just now."

" What is he ? "

" Ship's engineer."

I thought : Now we're getting down to it ! She went on in a gush of enthusiasm : " He's done everything, all over the world—prospecting, shooting, ruby-mining in Siam, civil engineering in Tasmania."

I said : " That's fine. Where are you going to live ? "

" Burslem."

Later in the evening I was having an illicit Scotch and soda at the Trentham Hotel with Uncle Crawshay. He said : " She's infatuated."

I replied earnestly : " You know very well, Uncle, that to say she's infatuated doesn't explain anything. What's behind it all ? "

He replied sombrely : " You'll see."

I obtained one more insight into Ben's character that night. When I had gone upstairs I heard Ethel moving about in her room, and knocked at the door. She was busy packing the family trunk, a massive construction with iron-bound corners. I said : " Ethel, I am the baby of the family but I am also your brother. If you find yourself in a fix at any time let me recommend you to come to me."

Without turning her head, she said : " Help me on to the landing with this thing, will you ? " She dropped the lid, and the two of us manœuvred the trunk through the doorway in a series of shuffles. It might have had a ballast of lead ingots. When she had shoved it into position, she said : " That'll show you. Ben lifted the thing by himself as though it were made of cardboard."

I discovered next day that Mother and Uncle Crawshay had been unable to put their impressions of Mr. Truscott into words because they had been forced into the pretence of accepting him as something normal. They argued that, as Ethel's groom, he must be normal. But he was not. I remember that at school one afternoon the groundsman's horse wandered into the school hall and pushed its head through the door of the Lower Fourth. Describing the incident later, Mme. Cécile, who had been taking French there, could only say: "I turned round and there was a horse, you see—a *horse*." She could find no words because the occurrence did not fit into convention. Similarly with Ben. I have at times to reassure myself that he really existed, for the two occasions on which I saw him were not enough to convince me.

The registrar was not concerned with ultimate mysteries, but with a matter of business, and confirmed them man and wife within eight minutes. Uncle Crawshay and I were witnesses. Afterwards Ethel gave Ben a lusty kiss, and Ben gave us a paralysing handshake. We then drove back to the house in Uncle Crawshay's car. Ben was a broad-shouldered fellow of about five feet six inches, with blue eyes in which molten anger seemed always to lie quaking. On that occasion he was wearing a new suit of royal blue with a yellow silk tie. For some reason I was nervous of him. In fact, I do not remember another wedding reception at which I was more frightened.

Over the breakfast-table he was mostly silent, only relating, when pressed by Ethel, how he had stood on a dam in the Rockies tending a concrete-mixer and noticed bison feeding on the plains below. He also told us how a ship's boiler had blown back while he had been feeding it with oil, and taken the skin off his forearms. This he proved by taking off his jacket there and then and showing us. His muscles were like the roots of trees. He did not don his jacket again, and he also removed his boots, for it was a hot day.

The meal was not a happy one. When it was over, Mother went to lie down and Uncle Crawshay, too, extended himself in the front room with a rug over his knees, and slept. More than anything, this rug filled me with tenderness for him because it told me that he was old. Ben himself cleared away the dishes, washed them up and stacked them on the table in seamanlike fashion. He didn't take much notice of Ethel.

Afterwards he took off his collar and tie, allowed his braces to hang in loops round his waist, and sat in the kitchen reading comics and boys' weeklies with which, knowing by experience that he would not find any in the house, he had provided himself.

I strolled round the garden admiring the old views of the park, and reflecting how glad I was to be grown up. Guests began to arrive, old school-friends of Ethel's and close personal friends of Mother's. I would take no responsibility for Ben. When anyone asked where he was, I pointed to the french windows leading to the drawing-room, into which he had removed himself. I observed him look up from his comics as Ethel introduced some lady or other, shake her hand and return to his reading.

I began to define my nervousness of him as a fear that he would shoot out an arm and bang me on the nose. This was easily understood because, as a boy, I had not been very strong, and the fear of being banged on the nose has always haunted me. At the tea-table, therefore, I sat as far away from him as possible. Although it was still very hot, he had replaced his jacket out of deference to the guests, but not his collar and tie. The others also seemed to be in fear of him, although they could not all have feared for their noses, and talked brightly amongst themselves, pretending that this reception was as all other receptions, and Ben unexceptionable among bridegrooms. He was very attentive to Mother, fetched her a cushion for the small of her back, and would not let her pour him out a second cup of tea, but rose to pour it out for himself.

He joined in more with the company after tea, gave one of his comics to a small cousin of mine, who said that she had read it, and in addition to the story of the concrete-mixer and the bisons, and that of the oil-burning boiler, gave an account of a shooting match in the Murchison Goldfields in which he had been wounded and two of his comrades and a woman shot dead. His attention was, however, diverted by the two maids whom Mother had hired for the afternoon, coming in to clear away the tea things, and no remonstrance of Ethel's could prevent his again taking his jacket off and washing up.

The guests departed sooner than we had expected.

Arrangements had been made for the couple to spend the week-end at Alton Towers, but at the last moment Ben said that he would spend the night where he was. When Ethel began to protest, his eyebrows gathered together and the anger began to quiver in his eyes, and the subject was not mentioned again.

Mother had gone upstairs and we did not see her again that evening. Ethel said that Ben liked to play poker, which I thought very natural—in all the travel books I had ever read men like Ben played poker in gambling hells in Valparaiso, in shack saloons on the Mackenzie River, or by the light of the Southern Cross in the Australian hinterland. But Ben turned out to be an indifferent player and lost heavily to Uncle Crawshay, whose mastery of the game had been acquired in the school common-room at Stone.

About nine o'clock Ben rose, smacked Ethel between the shoulder-blades, and said: "Come on, missis. We've got some work to do."

When they had gone, I felt even more pity for Uncle Crawshay, who lay back in his chair without moving. I mixed him a strong whisky and soda, of which a small quantity had been bought for the occasion. When he had drunk it his eyes opened and he said: "Harry, it's unbelievable. He's got a Mental age of fourteen."

I replied: "It's the revenge of nature. All her life she's starved herself. No one could be more virile than Ben. And from his point of view Ethel's supremely female in figure. Speaking as between men, you know."

He raised his hand, but let it fall impotently to the table. I mixed him another whisky and soda, and had one myself. He murmured: "But Ethel—*Ethel*——!"

I replied : " Travellers are only travellers because they haven't the wit to busy themselves at home. And another thing, with a chap like that, who's travelled all over the place, there's bound to be more than one woman."

We could neither of us entirely remove from our thoughts that Ben and Ethel lay upstairs. I suggested that we went for a walk, and when he would have refused, fetched his hat and coat. We turned through the park gates and took the long sandy drive past the Dairy House, then struck through the bracken towards King's Ridge. It was growing dark by the time we turned for home, but Ben's invisible presence made us reluctant to arrive. Uncle Crawshay told me that Ben was without a ship, without funds and, so far as could be discovered, without property of any sort except a pack of cards. He was, in short, entirely dependent upon Ethel's earnings. They expected to live, rent free, in one of two cottages that Mother owned in Waterloo Road, Burslem.

My uncle was nothing if not courteous. I was helping him to remove his coat when he said : " Harry, you've been a great comfort to us this afternoon. I shan't forget."

" Nothing of the sort. I took good care to keep as far away as possible."

" At least your marriage was perfectly straightforward."

Before going to bed I knocked at Mother's door and found her supported by quantities of pillows, reading a history of social service in the nineteenth century. Having creamed her hands, she was wearing an old pair of white cotton gloves, and she had also massaged her cheeks with a preparation of glycerine and lemon-juice from which the pillows were protected by a square of yellow flannel. The familiar sour smell made me smile. I sat on the end of the bed as I had sat hundreds of times before.

I said : " This is a queer business, Mother."

I knew by the manner in which she lay down her book that the county councillor was uppermost. She replied : " If anything happens to Ethel I shall expect you to look after her."

Notwithstanding that I had made the same suggestion to Ethel the night before, I scoffed : " Me ? After the mess she made of my childhood ? She's thirty-five and able to look after herself." I laughed. With Marjorie's money behind me, I felt that I could afford to laugh.

Mother replied simply : " You heard me, Harry."

I asked : " Why wasn't Gwennie here ? She could have come to the reception."

" Her husband wouldn't have liked it."

Evidently there was no arguing with Mother just then. I began to expostulate : " But, good heavens—— ! " but broke off to remark : " What the dickens has happened to those two girls ! Their marriages are both upside down."

Mother picked up her book again : " You're sure your own marriage is all right, are you ? "

I reflected that this intuition she possessed was the difference between her and her brother. I leaned over to kiss her good night, trying to suppress my emotion, but, having closed the door behind me, I exclaimed : " Oh, damn ! " I had gone in filled with benignity and forgiveness, and come out feeling twelve years old.

I could not sleep. Ben's presence was everywhere in the house, even in my room. About midnight I went downstairs in pyjamas and dressing-gown and sat down to play Bach at the old grand in the drawing-room, fugue after fugue, with the soft pedal down. My exasperation was passing into a mood of lofty indifference when I heard a movement and turned to see Mother in the doorway, wrapped in a brown woollen kimono and looking like a barn owl. I said nothing. She took a few faltering steps towards me, holding out her hands before she crumpled up into an arm-chair. I sprang up and put an arm round her. She was weeping silently, and at last said : " Oh, Harry, Harry—what will become of her ? I don't understand it."

I had never seen her cry before, except once, when the borough council had banned the opening of cinemas on

Sunday. Her emotions had all been concerned with slogans like " Full Cinemas, Empty Prisons " and " One Cell for the Rich and Another for the Poor ".

The reflection made me harden my heart. I said : " I once asked the same question about Father."

She said : " But Ethel—ten years ago I should have known what to do, but now—oh, Harry boy, I'm afraid. I don't understand at all."

Gradually I made her forget her tears, and led her into the kitchen, where I made tea. The house was silent. Because the night was oppressive, I opened the window and a moth flew in and fluttered round the light-bulb. The elms in the park stirred mysteriously and a dusky moon loomed hugely behind them. I said : " What's the matter with you, Mother, is that you've been ruled by your intelligence all your life. It's not enough."

She replied : " When you've given birth to three children, Harry, I'll listen to you."

I saw that she was better, and presently we went upstairs. I was a long time getting to sleep.

3

With the same dispassionate interest I went on the morrow to see Gwennie. I was warned to go in shop hours so that there could be no possibility of her husband seeing me, and, forgetting that he was a greengrocer, I took with me a bagful of Jaffas, King Williams and nectarines, and an armful of roses. I take no credit for so doing. I went merely to see in what form justice had overtaken her for making wretched the first twenty years of my life.

The particular form of justice that had overtaken Ethel was already gone from the house. In his unpredictable way Ben had decided at six in the morning to be gone with his bride, not to Alton Towers, but to London. The maid reported that he had lifted Ethel onto the kitchen mantelpiece as a punishment for putting sugar in his tea, and he had otherwise found time to scratch his initials on the cat's-whisker receiving-set, which, in point of fact, belonged to Uncle Crawshay.

I did not spend very long with Gwennie because she seemed to go in fear that Norman, her husband, would suddenly arrive home and find me. I saw nothing very terrible in my visiting her, inasmuch as I was her brother and she very near her time.

I found Gwennie in her kitchen peeling potatoes, with a bucketful of napkins boiling on the gas-stove and the two babies already born to her squealing and crawling about her legs. Although Uncle Crawshay had assured me that her husband was in a prosperous way of business and on the point of opening another shop in Newcastle, Gwennie's Hope Street house was poky, and the furniture of poor quality. The kitchen table, for instance, had been patched with the back of an orange-crate. I realised that here was another example in which the conventions laid down by Mother and Uncle Crawshay no longer held good—not that I censured Gwennie on this account, for I had long ago decided that one convention was as good as another, or even the absence of one.

Tact and discretion are unknown in the Potteries. I asked: "Why d'ye marry the chap, Gwennie?"

She turned an aggressive face to mine, absently stirred the boiling napkins with a stick and pulled one of the babies away from the stove. "You've never stopped asking soft questions, have you? Because I love him, that's why. What do you think?"

"You must admit that it's a bit different, all this."

"What if it is? You've come here to criticize." She shovelled the second baby out of the boot-box with a patched shoe, and turned to the sink. "I've never been happier in my life." She turned again to face me, wiping her nose with her arm, as though I had protested. "Well, so I am! All that humbug and pretence. Ethel—that old fool Crawshay. No wonder Norman wants me to cut out the lot of you. Satisfied?"

I had nothing to say. Nobody had warned me that marriage had turned her into a virago. Her prettiness had broadened into a massive maternal beauty, notwithstanding that her complexion was mottled and her hair falling about her shoulders in tufts. She vigorously banged a wooden spoon on the rim of a saucepan and brought out a bowlful of dirty linen from under the sink. "People talk of how marvellous it is to have babies, but as soon as they come everyone says: 'Poor thing!' Your wife's got no babies, I bet. Slops and napkins aren't in her line. Makes me tired."

Nothing could be more obvious than that she wanted to be rid of me, but I ventured to say: "You haven't asked me about the wedding."

Sousing the shirts and things in hot soapy water she replied: "Why should I? I've finished with it all. This is my life. Some damned dancing master she can lead about on a bit of string, if I know Ethel."

"Just the opposite. He's a brute of a ship's engineer who ate his wedding breakfast with his boots off."

She lifted back her head and gave a hoot of laughter before returning once more to sousing and wringing. "That'll take the starch out of her. Never could stand the sight of her. Norman'll be home soon."

I was on my way out when she shouted: "Here, take that fruit and stuff back with you. He'll want to know where it came from."

I retrieved the fruit and stuff, and said: "Well, good-bye." And without turning round, she said: "Good-bye." My last impression of her home was of one of my nieces, or perhaps it was a nephew, scrambling over the threshold in pursuit of me, and being hooked back by the patched shoe. I noticed that her cottage backed onto a small pottery whose kilns pushed their snouts through blackened roofs like fungus through rotten wood. I would have felt sorry for her, but I was unwilling to diminish myself by so much and she would not, in any case, have considered herself an object of pity.

I went out of my way to drop the fruit and flowers at the porter's lodge of the Royal Infirmary, in Hartshill, with directions that they should go to the maternity ward. That done, I collected my things from home, kissed my mother and took the three o'clock train back to London.

As always on leaving the Potteries, I had the impression of leaving one world for another, a troglodyte cavern for the meadows of Avalon. Now that I was removed from them, I saw Truscott and the invisible Norman not as my sisters' inescapable destiny, but as the figments of nightmare. I was bewildered and afraid. If they were a further manifestation of the life principle that had driven me to Charlotte, the sooner I got back to my quintets and silver tea-things the better.

I recovered my poise only when the doctor's wife told me that she had bought the scores for Brahms' String Quartet in A minor, Op. 51.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

IN THE following months my relations with Marjorie deteriorated. She made many timid attempts to win my affection, but was always defeated by my body's indifference.

I remember that one evening in the following spring I was in the morning-room pursuing Bach fugues, my favourite anodyne, when she appeared behind me in a ravishing evening gown which had been sent over the day before by her Paris dressmaker. It was of black silk moiré and depended, to the masculine eye at least, on a large bow at the shoulder. She could only have put it on for my benefit, for she had no intention of going out and for the previous hour had been writing letters.

She allowed me to play on and went to the window, which she threw open. A strong scent of pear blossom swam into the room, warring with the winter smell of soot and making me sneeze. She leaned her hands on the sill and said : " Harry, I wish you'd come here." I joined her. She said : " Look at those long shadows. It's the full moon behind the cedar." She turned her face to mine : " Can't you feel the spring pouring through your blood ! "

I replied : " Yes, vaguely."

" Take me into the garden."

A voice within me whispered : Harry, this is a trap ! but I agreed. She wrapped an old, hand-knitted shawl round her shoulders and the incomparable corsage of her Paris frock. In the garden she took my arm. I could feel the warm skin upon my wrist. It was difficult for me to forget that she was my wife, that we were young and that I was fond of her.

She said nervously : " Harry, I wish I knew what was the matter. Don't you love me ? " I mumbled something. She knew I did. She went on, forcing herself to say : " I have always got the feeling that you are holding something back. I do wish you'd tell me. Are you in love with someone else ? "

I asked playfully : " How many times have you found me sneaking off to some furtive assignation ? "

She shook my hand. " Seriously. Weren't you once in love with that office girl whom Will Holland married ? "

I said : " What's that hissing noise ? "

" Where ? "

" Over there, in the doctor's." We walked across to investigate. I said : " Charlotte ? Yes, I suppose I was, cooped up with her all day. She was very attractive. It's the spray the gardener's left on and forgotten."

We peeped over the wall and saw the spray slowly revolving and throwing out draperies of mist in which the moon made nocturnal rainbows. Marjorie asked: "Then you're in love with her!"

I replied: "Not in the least. I'd forgotten her."

She fell silent and we walked once or twice up and down the lawn, giving the lie to those neighbours who whispered that we were estranged. The scent of wallflowers under the doctor's high wall came and went with our passage. I would have given all her money to be elsewhere. She began to murmur hurriedly: "Harry, I've rented a cottage in the New Forest. It's marvellous, surrounded by woods of nightingales and fields of cowslips. There's a river and a mere with fish in them, and a punt. I have felt all along that this house is too big. Besides, it's too full of Daddy. We were wrong to come here. I want us to drop everything and go. Shall we?"

I replied: "If that damned thing doesn't stop hissing soon I'll go and wring its neck. Yes, of course. It sounds terrific."

She squeezed my hand, unable to speak for relief and excitement. I felt an utter cad, but could not imagine what other reply I might have made. We went into the house, and I began to turn out the lights and lock up the doors before going upstairs. I thought: "Somewhere there must be fifty fellows who'd give their boots to be in my place now." I went back to the morning-room more with the idea of getting Marjorie safely to bed than of playing Bach, but when I had reached the landing half an hour later she suddenly appeared in the doorway of her room, still attired in the Paris frock. Emotion made her inarticulate. She came up to me and whispered: "Harry!"

I said: "One of the maids is out and I have left the side door open."

"Harry, you know what they are all saying at home—Mother and Louise and the others—that you are just sponging on me; it's all you married me for. It's not true, is it, Harry?"

I could not even raise indignation. I kissed her smartly on the cheek and said: "Of course not, my dear," and walked into my room. To have shut the door would have injured her too much. I threw myself onto the bed, staring at the ceiling and listening to the faint hissing of the garden-spray and to Marjorie's sighs as she undressed, the dropping of her frock to the floor and the rattling of coat-hangers in the wardrobe.

I knew very well that the moment was crucial. I must either go in to Marjorie and make love to her, if only to prove that I had married her for more than sponging, or lose her for good. Odd that I should have to think twice about taking such an attractive step! Odder still that I should find inside myself an absolute aversion to taking it! In heaven's name, why? I was genuinely attached to her and the last person to wish to injure her. But positively to throw aside my garments and go in and embrace her! No. I shuddered.

By a curious chance she had that evening raised the forbidden subject of Charlotte, a name that I had suppressed every time it had occurred to me. Supposing Charlotte were Marjorie at that moment, should I have hesitated? Strangely enough, I thought I should. I was not merely averse to Marjorie, but to all womanhood. I thought I was cursed. Holland's talk of an exact justice rose up like a ghost—this was payment for the wrongs I had done both Charlotte and Marjorie. The sexual act, "the beast with two backs" as Shakespeare called it, now filled me with repugnance. It was the toy that a child flings to the nursery floor after months of itching to possess it.

I knew by the sounds that Marjorie was brushing her hair. Cautiously I rose from my bed and undressed. She had always looked extremely handsome while brushing her hair, with white upraised arms and bosom released from its daytime bondage. I looked at the open door and not for the first time reminded my body that, in theory, Marjorie represented all that man had ever desired. I encouraged it to think lasciviously of the lusts of the flesh. I told it that it had merely to walk out of my room into hers and clasp her in its arms. But it would pay no attention either to argument or to temptation, and in the lowest degree of velleity fell asleep.

The subject of the cottage in the New Forest was never raised again.

2

Marjorie left me that summer. Like a good many such decisions, it was taken in the pretence that it was temporary and that she would return as soon as certain extraneous factors had ceased to exist. But we both knew that the factors were irrelevant to the real issue, and that she would never return.

In themselves the factors were tragic and extraordinary enough. The first was that Mrs. Webster's father, Ivan Cusbeck, hanged himself from the limb of a tree in the over-grown quarry at the top end of the garden, having previously attired himself in his wife's nightgown. The episode was distasteful and I took good care to keep out of it, but a phrase or two that came out at the inquest recurs to me. His wife, the children's nurse, was the chief witness. It was because of a letter left on her dressing-table that she had gone out to find the body. On the strength of this letter the coroner asked her whether it was true that she had refused to bear him a son, to which she replied that it was, and that, both as wife and as a State-registered nurse, she had been qualified to decide.

A verdict was returned of suicide while of unsound mind.

My experiences latterly had given me some insight into the reason for the suicide. Although the nightgown puzzled me, I privately doubted whether the suicide had been undertaken while of unsound mind. I remembered from the circumstances of my father's death that life does not hesitate to mock at death itself, but Ivan Cusbeck's end had brought home to me an even more impressive lesson. In some echo of my school-days I remembered Plato reporting that the poet Sophocles rejoiced because old age had delivered him from love " as from a mad and furious master ". From the inquest it transpired that, to Ivan Cusbeck at least, old age had done no such thing. On the contrary, it had made him commit suicide.

This occurrence was sufficient to send Marjorie to the Websters' for a while, but not decently to remain there. Mrs. Cusbeck willingly reverted to her position as children's nurse, and because her late husband had not left her much more affluent than when she had first arrived, she was again paid a salary. Indeed, I saw her in Harrow two months after the tragedy, in pink uniform with starched cuffs and collar, wheeling little Agnes in a go-cart, and the sight afforded me a sharp sermon on the transience of man.

What took Marjorie from me for good was a cable that Louise had been left penniless with a baby at an hotel in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Marjorie telephoned me with the news from the Websters', and within three hours was on her way to the States. Generous and impulsive, it was typical of Marjorie.

I was slow to realize that the trend of these tragedies had been to leave me in sole possession of the house, for I lived mostly in the kitchen. Only now and then would I become aware of the silence and walk through the rooms and landings, locking doors after me, reproached, as at Manucke's, by the silent piano and dusty violins (for I had abandoned even them), leaving Marjorie's ribbon on the floor and the boiled sweets to liquefy in the cupboard, observing that soot had fallen in the parlour and locking the door on it, leaving the front door untouched so that the bolt rusted in the socket, and returning to the snug kitchen that I shared with the cat in an atmosphere of boiled fish.

This carelessness was not caused by lack of money, for I had much of my father's legacy left, so much as by inanition.

Mankind does everything with the idea of making a habit of it. I reduced this principle to its elements. I slept in the same hollow of my bed. I threw household refuse into a barrow outside the back-door and emptied it every Sunday afternoon at the back of the garden. When the bottom fell out of my only chair I padded it with *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and two dozen copies of the *Times Literary Supplement*. When I shaved, I shaved during the nine o'clock news, and I wore my bicycle clips throughout the day because they kept my ankles warm.

When I looked through the front windows upon the never-ending traffic of Watling Street, I marvelled at the ingenuity of man in finding reasons for chasing about the countryside instead of staying sensibly at home.

Occasionally something arrived to disturb me. I received a letter from a firm of solicitors in Fig Tree Court, Messrs. White, Bodikins & Veitch, telling me that under power of attorney for my wife they were proposing to charge me a nominal rent of thirty shillings per week, payable quarterly. I made no reply. I knew very well that Marjorie would not have wished me to be imposed upon like that. It was enough that I paid rates, and the gas and electricity bills.

One January afternoon of pink and grey, when the street lamps were glimmering at four o'clock, Mother arrived in the car with Uncle Crawshay. They had been travelling all day and were numb with cold. Mother's character was such that she at once flung open the kitchen door to get rid of the smell of fish, thus dissipating in five minutes the comfortable warmth I had been accumulating since morning.

I noticed a trunk on the back of the car, and while the kettle was boiling I went hurriedly to open the letter from her that had been lying for two days unopened on the hall table. Mother's letters were mostly filled with veiled rebukes, and since Marjorie's departure I had seen no reason why I should suffer rebukes, even from mother, however veiled. In it I read that Ethel and Ben had not enjoyed living alone in the Waterloo Road house, and a week before had gone to live at Trentham with Mother.

Mother described the arrangement as impossible. Ben tickled the maid, who was over sixty and above tickling, sat at table clad only in undervest and trousers, and sometimes brought home acquaintances either from his seafaring life or picked up on football grounds, with their girl friends. Even when Mother dared to remonstrate with him, he failed to understand her. Weren't they good friends, and had he behaved differently from usual? Mysteriously, Ethel affected to see no wrong in him either. Until Ben was given a job, of which the chances seemed remote in that inland city, Mother felt that she would prefer to live with me.

When I returned to the kitchen I found Mother removing the cat's bed, which was the pastry-board spread with newspapers and a tablecloth, from its lodging between the top of the boiler and the top of the gas stove. She said that it was unhealthy. More than anything this decided me against her. Her chubby pink face, in which old age was renewing the prettiness, revived in me all the tenderness one associates with motherhood. Her persecution of the cat reminded me of the humiliations of childhood and of my father's fate.

I felt more sympathy with Uncle Crawshay. After all, he'd had more years of Mother than I had. She rather than petrol had been the driving spirit of their frosty ride. I revived him with whisky, and was rewarded by the movement of a smile within the beard. Thereafter he sat on the stove fender, too courteous to be distressed, but tired and with nothing new to say.

The question of bedrooms arose. Of course, nothing was ready for them. Mother made a round of the bedrooms by herself, and came downstairs wrinkling her nose and declaring that she would have the maids' room.

I saw my opportunity. I said that there was a bird's nest in the guttering outside which had made the walls damp and set up dry-rot. She said that, whether or not, she would have that room. I refused to let her have it and insisted that she had Marjorie's, which was vast, without heat and faced north. We wrangled all evening and finally she took Marjorie's, after

I had filled the bed with hot-water bottles. Uncle Crawshay slept with me.

Mother woke us at seven the next morning, looking distraught and pale. She passed no comment on how she had slept, but told Uncle Crawshay to get dressed and take her home forthwith.

They departed about ten, when the sky was beginning to look like day. There was a hint of snow in the air. I went back to the kitchen rubbing my hands, replaced the cat's perch above the two stoves, and reflected that what had pained Mother more than the cold bedroom was my defeat of her.

I remember that it was different weather, although in the same year, when I heard of Mother's death. About the same time Messrs. White, Bodikins & Veitch had sent me the second of three grave letters mentioning the amount I was in arrear and expressing reluctance to proceed further, in view of all the circumstances. This meant that they knew Marjorie would not have approved.

I was seated in a deck-chair in a camp of trampled grass on the overgrown lawn watching the progress of two thunderstorms hurtling to do battle with one another, one from the north and the other from the west, with the sky between them flushed with anger. The cat disliked thunderstorms and had taken refuge under the deck-chair, leaving the usual litter of picked fish-bones round the edge of our compound. From firing vague cannon at one another, the two armies overhead suddenly let loose all their artillery with an appalling crack, and drops like shillings appeared on the knees of my trousers.

At the same moment there was a banging on the front door.

I scuttled within, followed by the cat, and found a telegraph boy. The telegram read: "Mother died 5 a.m. Funeral Friday. Ethel."

By now the cloud sluices were wide open, the road swilling with water and the trees hunching their shoulders against the blast. The boy was anxious to return, but it was obvious that he couldn't, and I took him inside and gave him tea. He told me that he lived with his parents in Edgware, would have nothing to do with girls and, instead, was saving up to buy a bicycle. Even when the downpour had slackened he could not depart because water had got into the carburettor of his motorcycle.

Uncle Crawshay, Ethel and I were the chief mourners. Ben had gone to Liverpool after a job, so that all the trepidation I had felt at the prospect of meeting him was wasted. I had no need to be told that Gwennie was expecting to be confined. This would make her fifth. I had taken a heavy, pre-Marjorie overcoat with me and was forced to wear it throughout the proceedings because my clothes were otherwise in tatters, and a crowd of notabilities had come to pay their respects to Mother's memory.

No doubt she had lived a life of exemplary discipline and altruism. The Lord Mayor of the newly-created city was present in his capacity as Chief Magistrate, and also a High Court judge, the Chief Constable of the County and other distinguished figures in the world of prisons. Ethel kept her head as high as at Father's funeral. Only Uncle Crawshay looked depressed. He left us immediately after the interment without saying good-bye to me, for which I was sorry.

My grandfather's estate had passed to Crawshay, who owned both the Llandudno house and my own home, and Mother's death left me no better off in pocket.

Once at home again I began for the first time to feel lonely. I might conjure up endless childish memories of my mother's sternness, her discourses upon obedience and self-discipline, and, what was worse, her indifference; but part of me was dismayed that she was dead. The feeling returned of impotence in the face of destiny. Death should have spared her, the wisest and most worthy of humankind. But it had not. Destiny was therefore without discernment or conscience.

I went over the history of my relations with Mother and could not see how, pitted from the start as a defenceless babe against her infallibility, I could have behaved differently or been made to look anything but foolish. I had fancied that I had triumphed over her in the matter of bedrooms, but I had not. She had defeated me, as in everything else, this time by dying.

Ideas of death began to obsess me although I realized that I was at a disadvantage because I knew nothing about man's condition hereafter. Sleep began to fail me. All those lovely images with which I had wooed sleep as a child, those magical strains that had swept through me, were irretrievably lost. All that lay within me was a hard and irritable core. Memories of Charlotte returned. However painful, my love for her had roused in my entrails a warmth and sense of well-being, as from a good meal.

3

In the October following Mother's death I opened the door to Ethel. Perhaps Uncle Crawshay had told her that the front door was not in use, for she appeared at the back, squeezing herself with a large attaché-case between the refuse barrow and the steps. We stood looking at one another until she said : " Well, aren't you going to ask me in ? "

" Why should I ? "

" Don't talk like a drip. You're my brother aren't you ? " and she added : " Ben's in prison."

I replied : " I don't wonder. What for ? "

" Bigamy."

I saw then that her aggressiveness was cloaking shame and stupefaction, perhaps even grief. I stood back and admitted her. Exactly like her mother, she thrust her chin into the air, sniffed and flung the door open. The weather was tolerably warm, so I didn't mind. She said : " Crawshay thinks you're crazy. He says you go to bed with your cycle clips on, and store your old sardine tins."

I laughed for the first time in years. "Tell me about the bigamy."

It transpired that Ben had been arrested when on a further visit to Liverpool looking for a ship. Ethel was not even his second wife, but his third, the first being a florist's assistant in Los Angeles and the second a widow of forty in Birkenhead. Ethel produced newspaper cuttings. The common factor between all three was an abundant bosom. Unfortunately the case had got into the Staffordshire papers, and whilst public sympathy must ever be extended to the victim of bigamy, Ethel's sense of being fooled had been too strong for her to remain.

I said: "You can stay here as long as you like, provided you remember that it's my house."

She sniffed again. "It's time someone came and brought back sanity to it."

I exclaimed: "Sanity! Didn't you ever realize, inside yourself, that Ben was unusual?"

"In what way?"

"Sitting about reading comics in his pants and undervest, for instance."

She replied mysteriously: "Ben was a man."

She seemed to bear him no ill-will. She chose to sleep in the maids' room, and I raised no objection. When I returned to the kitchen, she had dismantled the cat's bed and thrown it out of doors, dusting her hands afterwards as though of germs. I raised no objection to that either. The cat's smugness had once seemed to me perfection, but now I was glad to see it cast down.

Ethel was with me for six months, in which time her native energy made her undertake all the cooking and housework, as well as cleaning down the entire house and whitening three of the bedroom ceilings. Some deep human lesson imparted by her marriage and subsequent humiliation made her refrain from criticizing me, although her bearing naturally implied that I was of an inferior species. From her improvement I learnt that crimes such as bigamy, adultery, and the wilfulness of illicit love generally, might have great social value, if properly directed.

One March evening I was plastering the ceiling in the pantry—to such lengths had Ethel's revitalizing presence driven me—while Ethel herself was upstairs washing her hair, when I heard a couple of raps on the back door. Following an outbreak of petty robberies in the neighbourhod, we had kept the door locked. Without removing my apron, I went into the kitchen and turned back the key. The door was immediately pushed open and Ben Truscott slipped inside, shutting the door behind him. He was out of breath, and was wearing an old mackintosh and a trilby pulled well over the eyes.

He said : " Where's your sister ? " and when I started feebly to protest he grasped the lapels of my jacket and lifted me off my feet. " Come on, now, where's she gone ? "

I said : " Don't be an idiot. She's upstairs washing her hair."

He replaced me. " Go and call her."

I opened the door and shouted : " Ethel ! " Ben prodded me from behind, and I shouted : " Ethel, you're wanted ! It's urgent."

I caught a faint shout in reply. Even Ben saw that it is impossible for a woman to race downstairs while washing her hair, even though the house were on fire.

Ten minutes later she appeared in the doorway with a towel round her head, like a turban. In that time Ben had wolfed half a loaf of bread, a bowlful of stew, and a rice-pudding with prunes. He had only broken silence to demand a suit, a flannel shirt and a collar and tie. The reunion was touching. Ethel said : " Ben ! " and flung her arms round him. Apart from anything else, I was interested to see Ethel abandoned to a man's embrace. At one time I should have thought it impossible. She broke away only to ask : " What's happened ? "

" I escaped from a working party." He flexed his forearm and I saw streaked across it an immense blue weal. " What's the good of having muscles if you don't use 'em? Get your things, we're going."

Ethel stayed only to enquire: " Where are we going to? "

" I got a second-engineer's job on an Entwistle Line boat bound for the East Indies. I got the O.K. for you, too." To me he said: " You keep your trap shut. I never bin here, see? As for Ethel, she's gone back home." To Ethel he said: " I'll look after this twit. Get going. She's sailing tonight from the Pool."

I felt bound to expostulate. Ethel had turned to go, when I cried: " Ethel, you're out of your senses. After the injury he's done you? Good heavens, you never know——" I had got so far when the expected happened, and I was banged on the nose. There was nothing very much I could do about it, except put a key down my back.

Ten minutes later they were gone. I never saw either of them again, although I heard in a roundabout way that Ethel came eventually to keep a boarding-house in Newcastle, N.S.W. Out of academic interest I sometimes wondered where she dried her hair.

Ben's rape of Ethel was the only bit of pure melodrama that ever came my way.

4

I spent the next four years alone, falling again into a trough of lethargy, if anything deeper than before. Nothing moved me, neither desire, ambition nor curiosity. Tiles flew off the roof, the local ratepayers' association complained that my hedges overhung the roadway to the common danger, my teeth ached, I ran out of razor-blades, a fox made its lair among the wild Michaelmas daisies under the doctor's wall, and the culminating point was reached when I entered an Edgware teashop and before I could sit down was asked by the manageress to leave.

During that time only two events of importance occurred.

Marjorie's solicitors had sent me more than one final letter exhorting me by virtue of their power of attorney to pay rent or face eviction, when I received a visit from an inoffensive fellow in bowler hat and brown shoes. When I had told him who I was he produced a long white document from his breast pocket and handed it to me, with the words: "It's my duty to give you this, sir." And, seeing that I, too, was inoffensive, he added: "I'm sorry."

When I had spent some twenty minutes penetrating the document's idiom I learnt that my caller had been a County Court bailiff and that he had served me with a summons for possession, arrears of rent amounting to £158—odd, mesne profits, and costs. Probably this would have amounted to a great deal more had not Ethel convinced me, during her stay, that it was immoral to have possession of a house rent free, even though it were my wife's, and caused me to make over to the solicitors between £300 and £400. This had not only brought me to within measurable distance of starvation, but had given the lawyers a precedent. The law loves nothing so much as a precedent.

Nothing was to be gained by further staring at the summons, even if it had been less mysteriously worded, for I had nothing like £158 left to me. I felt that exceptional enterprise was called for, and immediately rose and went to a call-box. I had not entered a call-box for five years and spent several minutes confusing the operator and losing fourpence before I got through to the Websters' and heard Mrs. Webster's voice.

I said: "Hello! This is Harry Wilshaw. It's years since I've seen you. I say, where's Marjorie these days?"

It was a forlorn hope. I had last heard that she was in British Columbia. Mrs. Webster replied: "Why, Harry! How are you? She's in the kitchen. Just a minute."

I awaited Marjorie with mingled pleasure and trepidation. Presently her voice said: "Hello, Harry, is that you?"

"Marjorie! What are you doing here?"

"Looking after a couple of babies. Yes, two. One of them's Louise's and the other's Daddy's. Isn't he the limit! It's that Swedish singer's, and he had the nerve to give it to us to look after! The only thing is, it's a boy and we aren't used to them. But—Harry! What's happened to you?"

I replied: "Do you realize that your solicitors have just served me with a summons to pay them £158 and clear out?"

She was aghast. "What? No! Aren't they beasts! Really, Harry, you didn't for one moment imagine that I—they've got power of attorney, still. I'll phone them up. It's terrible. I don't know what to say." Then she began to giggle. "Poor Harry!"

I said: "You sound awfully nice. Are you quite well?"

"Yes, I'm quite well." She hesitated before adding: "I say, as I'm doing this for you, would you do something for me?"

I replied largely: "Anything."

"I don't know how to put it. Couldn't we get a divorce?—I mean, would you let me divorce you? It isn't much good as we are. Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. The only thing is I don't want you to divorce me. I'm too fond of you, and the basis of all true marriage is being fond of one another. Ask any bishop you like. And another thing, you can't divorce me because I'm not that sort of chap. I'm absolutely faithful to you."

She was disappointed. She murmured: "Oh, very well. There's something else. You'll never guess. I've met Holland again."

"What, Will?"

"Yes. He's living in Harrow on a new estate somewhere, with a family of children. He's with the B.B.C."

"So he's found an opening for his music at last!"

Nothing further that was memorable passed between us. We hung up regretfully. Although I heard no more about being turned out, the conversation upset me for several days. I was not used to excitement. Holland! Divorce! I was made aware that, however much I isolated myself, life was on the move and would ultimately have me in its toils again. The only questions were, how soon and in what manner?

The second event was more trivial. I had taken shelter against November gusts in the deserted doorway of a fishmonger's in the Edgware Road when a young woman, neat and with a pleasant chubby face, spoke to me and induced me, by her Welsh accent and pleasant manner—she reminded me of Molly Roper—to go home with her.

Her name was Nancy. She had chosen her career, audaciously and against advice, in preference to a hazardous and primitive life in a Glamorgan mining village where, she said, the most thriving concerns were the public, the Labour Exchange and the hospital, in that order. In London, she said, she made an easy living for herself, people were very nice, and her only complaint was that she was forced to pay someone called Mr. Issuri, whom she didn't even know, a fifth of her earnings. Her greatest ambition was to have a telephone, which would lift her into a superior grade.

I advised her to take more care of her teeth, and we became good friends. Indeed, I was charmed, and visited her more than once. I learnt from her, if nothing else, that whatever ill assailed me, it was not a mechanical one.

Throughout these years a new Harrow had been rising on the fields of the old. Sometimes when I went on shopping expeditions, on an old bicycle of Marjorie's, I was surprised to find myself bowling along a new concrete road that ended in a hawthorn hedge, or standing outside shops where, as it seemed only a week before, I had watched rooks nesting in bare elms. From the hill one saw acres of new red roofs extending towards Wembley, Hendon and Windsor. The newer the houses the louder the boasts of antiquity, and dates such as 1592 and 1607 began to appear on fronts and chimney-stacks at Pinner and Stanmore.

It was in a shopping centre serving the new estate of Hooking Green that I again met Holland. He had as great a difficulty in recognizing me as I him. My cycle was standing by the kerb, and with one leg over the saddle I was reading the evening paper when a motor-cycle combination drew in behind me and the driver stiffly dismounted. I felt him staring at me, and looked up to stare back. He was attired in a long rubber overcoat, Wellingtons and a cloth cap. Only when he had pushed up his goggles did I recognize Holland. I found myself trembling, and exclaimed: " Will ! "

His stern red face hardly moved. He said: " What a bloody scarecrow you are, Harry." We shook hands. His hard blue eyes did not leave my face. He asked: " Are you hard up? Marjorie said you were all right."

" I'm all right."

" Then why don't you shave? " He turned aside, bought a paper and came back. " I'm in a hurry now. Come and see us. 17, Holmoak. Can you manage it? " I hesitated. I saw myself as he saw me, a tramp in the last stages of moral and physical disrepair. He added: " Charlotte'll expect you. Tonight? " I felt that while buying the paper he had overcome his repugnance so far as to extend me charity.

I said weakly: " Tomorrow night."

He remounted his cycle and adjusted his goggles. " Right. Seven o'clock."

He had started his engine when I shouted: " Thought you were with the B.B.C. ! "

The cycle began to move. He shouted back: " So I am. I'm a dispatch-rider."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

I WENT to the Hollands' cheerfully, feeling that I owed them what help I could. After all, Will and I had always been pretty thick. More, he had been in trouble, and the poor chap hadn't got very far with his music if he was only driving a motor-cycle. As my father had said, time was also a remedy, and ten years had mended even my fear of Charlotte. After bearing a family, she could scarcely be expected to rouse the old hungers.

However, as I jumped off my bicycle outside the house I began to feel a qualm or two. I had found that, having lived alone for so long, what I imagined sometimes differed from what existed in reality. I felt that I might be entering not Will's home but an unknown country in which the natives were hostile.

Dusk was descending. The blossom on the almond and crab-apple trees lining the street was just fading. The house was one of the thousands to be observed from the hill, semi-detached, with a privet hedge surrounding a lilac bush in bloom, and a joint drain gurgling under an inspection cover by the front gate.

I had come to hate formality, and rather than knock at the front door I pushed my cycle round to the side and opened the gate. As I entered, Charlotte was coming towards me with her arms full of dried clothes she had just unpegged from the line. The last time I had seen her was on Euston Station after the Llandudno holiday. She looked plump and happy. Numerous fine lines gathered in astonishment on her forehead as I leaned my cycle against the fence.

I said : " Hello, Charlotte. I've brought you some rhubarb."

She replied: "My, Harry, you did give me a start." And by way of afterthought: "We've got stacks of it."

"Well then, a jar of honey."

She began to giggle and pushed open the back door to enter the kitchen, where she set the washing down. I put the rhubarb and honey beside it, after which we looked at one another. My chief impression was of the friendliness she gave out. It was a new thing. I had been starved of friendliness. I saw the old neatness of hair and the fullness which had replaced the irresistible corsage. I wanted to hug her, and did in fact lay my hand on her arm, but she removed it.

I asked: "Will not in?"

"No, he's late. Sometimes he has to go to Oxford." She began to sort out the washing, sprinkled water over it and bundled it away in a corner of the dresser. "You're thinner."

I knew Charlotte. These were merely words to cover perturbation. I had felt the understanding of old friends unite us from the moment of our encounter. I was astonished that ten years had wrought so little change, and I observed with alarm how my emotions ranged themselves in a new orientation. I said: "Thank God you're comfortably settled down and that awful business is finished with."

Through the kitchen window I spied a long green garden and a little girl come hopping down the path. I was not practised in the ages of children, and put her at ten or twelve. She burst hopefully into the kitchen, panting: "Has Daddy come yet?" and was suddenly abashed. "Oh, it's a man."

Charlotte was laying a red and white check tablecloth, and had her back to us. Some cold potatoes and a plate of meat were standing near the frying-pan on the gas stove, doubtless waiting for Will. With memories of Gwennie's kitchen, I reflected how personality can charge rooms with friendliness or bad temper as with electricity.

It was useless to pretend that the child had not arrived, abashed or not. She had the pudding cheeks of childhood, a topaz glowed in each of her eyes, and Charlotte had transferred into her keeping some of her fair silken hair. I asked her how she was, and she replied in one breath: "I'm very well thank you how are you."

Charlotte said: "This is Hope, Harry." And to Hope she said: "It's almost time to come in, duckie. Go and tell the others."

Others? I thought. How many? The door banged behind her. I caught a glimpse of bobbing hair and fair-isle jumper fleeing up the garden, now suddenly stooping over a flower, now jumping to set a branch swinging. She had set the same branch swinging on her way in. I had sometimes thought of Charlotte as having a baby, but here was a complete person. I reflected that of course she could not have been twelve, and must have been eight or nine.

I said: "It was a mild winter, after all."

Charlotte replied: "I hate winter. All that rain and cold."

At that moment Will arrived. Charlotte lifted her head and said: "That's him," and I heard the thumping of a motor-cycle engine. He appeared within two minutes, and upon seeing me stopped on the threshold and said: "How long have you been here?"

Charlotte replied behind me: "Five or ten minutes. He's brought us some honey and rhubarb."

Will took off his long rubber coat and sat heavily in a chair to take off his Wellingtons. The kitchen was almost filled with the three of us. To me he said: "I never thought you'd come." And to Charlotte: "I met him in North Harrow a couple of nights ago, but he's shaved since then."

I asked: "Weren't you expecting me, then?"

Charlotte replied: "No. Why should I? After something like eight or nine years—with a bundle of rhubarb." She began to giggle, bundled the boots into a cupboard and lifted the coat into the hall. The frying-pan was already sizzling. She went on: "Did he ask you to supper? You look hungry."

"Yes. I am hungry."

She produced another knife and fork and added pickles, bread, butter and cheese. "There, I think that's all." Warmth began to brew in my entrails. For so long I had been absent from crowded kitchens in which people were all jostled together, frying-pans spat and good-tempered women placed pickles at your elbow. Charlotte giggled again. "Fancy forgetting to tell me."

Will replied bluntly: "I didn't forget. I just didn't think he'd come." And to me he said: "Is that suit your own?"

"Of course it is. I'm stuck for the rates, that's all."

A clamour of shrill voices arose outside, the back door was flung open and the children burst in upon us. The kitchen was filled by their cries as by the bickerings of starlings. There were only three. Hope embraced Will's knees as though she had been parted from him for six months, and began to study the cartoons of the evening paper he gave her. A boy with a shock of black hair who reminded me of Will fell ferociously upon a bowlful of sago pudding spread with jam. A very small girl, to whom walking was a novelty, found herself near a stranger and was struck dumb with wonder and embarrassment. I had forgotten what children were like. Their anxiety to absorb every new impression immediately made me feel like seventy.

Apart from stroking Hope's cheek with the back of his forefinger, Will took no notice of them. Charlotte placed before each of us a plateful of bubble and squeak, Will cut some meat, and we fell to. Will plied his knife and fork on either side of Hope as though she weren't there. Whereas Charlotte was enjoying a golden summer, Will had scarcely altered. He seemed bigger than before, more stern and more silent. He uttered the word "water" and Hope at once put down the paper, filled a mug with cold water from the tap over the sink, gave it to him and resumed her reading. He had to remind her that I, too, might need water, and she blushed and fetched me a mugful also. Charlotte's bare arm appeared over my head and placed between us a bowlful of sago and stewed rhubarb. The two smaller ones finished their supper and Charlotte began to pick up sandals, small socks and jackets and finally the baby herself. Before going, she said: "Hope, dear, ten minutes."

As she turned in the doorway to see that she had got everything, I reflected that if she, with her armful of child, were the prime expression of life, then it must be forgiven a great deal.

Evidently Hope was treated as someone apart. She prepared a plateful of supper for herself, but returned to eat it within the shelter of Will's legs. Sometimes a glance or word passed between them, but no more, as though they were sufficiently in one another's thoughts. Sundry squeals and thumps above our heads indicated that bathing was in progress. At last Hope pushed away her plate and with no more farewell than a pat on Will's knees glided from the room, shutting the door behind her.

I said: "You remember Severnake? He told me that you were married."

His sternness relaxed. Perhaps he had merely been hungry. He asked: "What d'he tell you?"

"That you'd beaten up Snyder and got married and gone to quod."

"It wasn't quite in that order. You don't read the papers." He rose, left the kitchen and returned in a minute with a newspaper cutting which he threw on the table. "I beat up Snyder, went to quod and then got married. Read that."

The cutting was from the *Watford Weekly* and dated September 17th, 1924. It was headed MARRIAGE OFFERS AFTER STOPPED WEDDING and read:

> "Numerous proposals of marriage have been received by both bride and groom—Miss C. Rhode of the Watling Estate and Mr. W. Holland of Harlesden—whose wedding,

arranged to take place at the Register Office, West Street, on Thursday of last week, was stopped at literally the last minute when the police arrested the groom on a charge of assault. Miss Rhode is away from home, but it is known that she has received ' very many proposals ' by post. Mr. Holland received about twenty letters which came from many parts of the country. Some of the letters contained stamped addressed envelopes, in several cases photographs, and others hopefully gave their phone numbers.

" WHAT GIRLS SAID

" This is taken from a letter sent to Mr. Holland by a Swindon girl :

" ' I couldn't help feeling sorry for you hearing of you going to prison on your wedding night. I suppose your fiancée won't have you now and this is to let you know that I will. I suppose you think this is a joke, but it isn't, I'm serious. I'm twenty-five, fairly good-looking and I work in a tallow factory.'

" A twenty-two-year-old Wetherby (Yorks) girl wrote :

" ' You probably think I am crazy writing to you when I have never seen you in my life and don't know you from Adam. Anyhow, Mr. W. Holland, you can laugh if you wish, but this is a crazy world, and in case you don't know it I am asking you to marry me.' "

Several more letters were quoted in the same tenor, and the last one read :

> " ' When she ditches you I hope you won't hold any hatred for we females. I don't go out at nights or smoke or drink. You can call me Flossie.' "

I took some time studying these letters, being chiefly engaged with the news that two or three months had intervened between Charlotte's Llandudno holiday and her marriage.

At last I returned the cutting and said : " There's no end to it, is there ? I mean the fatuities that sex drives them to. How d'ye go on in prison ? "

" I was glad of it. After Smith & Snelson's it was a rest cure. I was worried about Charlotte, that's all." Self-consciously he changed the subject : " What happened between you and Marjorie ? "

" We didn't hit it off and she left me."

" What are you doing ? "

" Nothing."

" You can't mean *nothing*, sitting at home all day."

" I mean absolutely nothing. Why not ? It's a convention most people never grow out of, clocking in at nine to clock out at five-thirty at someone else's business. Smith & Snelson's and that polished mahogany nightmare of Manucke's cured me. Never again."

He was silent, playing with his spoon until he said, quizzically : " You're no damned advertisement for the life of leisure, anyway."

I asked : " What happened to the old captain, Charlotte's father ? "

" He went back to sea. We had a bust-up, but he visits us when he's in port. He mostly trades round the Malay Archipelago."

I began to laugh. " Same old Will. You get pushed in quod, marry, have three children and wrap it all up with ten years' experience in four sentences. It's the Russian in you."

Holland, too, laughed. That is, he hissed between his teeth and heaved his chest. " Same old Harry, still up the wrong tree. I'm no more Russian than you are."

I gazed at him with astonishment. " But that frightful story about the green curtain and Ferenczi's suicide in the Limehouse Cut——"

" I daresay. But whoever my father was, he wasn't Ferenczi."

He seemed to regard the subject as closed, for he rose and began methodically to lift the dirty dishes into the sink and wash them up. I helped, my first altruistic action for a decade. A scratching came at the door and we found Hope outside in slippers and dressing-gown, her cheeks newly scrubbed and hair still damp. Will kissed her, patted her cheek and said good night, whereupon she turned to go upstairs again while Will shut the door and resumed wiping up.

Because the Edwardian celebrity, Ferenczi, had taken with his wife a child not his own, I viewed Will's attachment to Hope with misgiving. When he had kissed Hope good night, what memories disturbed him of his own childhood? Gulfs of speculation opened before me. I enquired of myself whether the sight of Hope had roused in me the emotions of authority and tenderness usually associated with fatherhood, and the answer was a decided No. Nor, apparently, had I roused in Hope any mystic respect and love. She looked nothing like me. Nor, for that matter, did she look anything like Will. The suspicion was ridiculous. Charlotte had written me confessing her mistake. Will would not at this moment have been entertaining me. Still less would Charlotte.

It was strange that, in the face of these arguments, the suspicion was not allayed.

Charlotte came softly into the kitchen with the smile usual to mothers who have just put their children into the safety of bed after the perils of the day. She said: "You shouldn't have washed up. It isn't often we have visitors," and let down her ironing board.

Will took no notice of her and said to me: "I want to talk to you. Let's go into the garden."

At least, I thought, the garden was too public a place to stage a row.

It was an exact rectangle and had been divided by Will into beds, borders and lawns with characteristic neatness. Bush apple trees and small pears had been planted in the middle of each bed, but at the end of the garden a previous owner had put down a sprawling plum with less regard for tidiness. The garden was bounded on all sides by chestnut palings, along which blackberry, loganberry and rambler rose had been trained, looking with their spring shoots like pipes with bursts. As Will pointed out the features of this regularized Eden, he picked up a skipping-rope, a couple of tennis balls, a wooden spade and a number of tin boxes, uttering by way of criticism the word : " Animals."

I said : " I suppose this is your most recent version of the *vie de Bohème*." He even smiled. I continued : " Honestly, Will, this stereotyped way of living is the last I should expect you to choose."

" Rubbish. Stereotyped ? Dinner-suits have different men inside 'em. This chap next door is a railway boss and trade-union leader who married his secretary. We hear her bally-ragging him all day and half the night. Beyond him are a couple with four children, devoted to one another but unmarried. A few gardens down is a woman who cut her throat because of her husband's infidelities, and has since worn a high collar. Nothing is so grotesque that it can't happen here. It's Earl's Court and Kensington that are so damned uniform."

Will had always kept his mouth shut about things he cherished most. Anger might make him speak about Hope, but I saw nothing in the garden to make him angry. Similarly he had so far kept quiet about music. Now, with considerable strength of mind, he said : " I say, about Marjorie. Have you heard from her lately ? "

" Only from her solicitors, and once over the telephone. I thought perhaps that you might be able to tell me something."

Always unpredictable, he exclaimed : " What are you driving at ! "

Genuinely astonished, I said : " Why should I be driving at anything ? Mrs. Webster's always had the highest regard for you. Marjorie, too. Really, Will ! "

He mumbled : " I've been to one of their Sundays. It's a mystery up there why you and Marjorie don't hit it off. They can none of them account for it."

"There must be thousands of such failures for which no explanation can be made public. But in the privacy of your back garden I can give you the explanation for mine. In her bed Marjorie made me feel that I was a hangman breaking St. Catherine on the wheel. Nobody expects martyrdom in his marriage bed. The strain is too great. Much as I was fond of her, we had to part."

"Well, if that's all——!"

"All! You try it and see. I suppose she's still keeping other people's babies?"

"The nurse does that, Mrs. Cusbeck."

I began to smile and uttered the words: "Fantastic business!" Will failed to smile. He said:

"It was a tragedy. You forget that ultimately it isn't the peculiarities of man's life that count, but what he leaves behind him. I've got a book of Cusbeck's upstairs——" He broke off. "No, she and Louise have restarted those Sunday parties of Dr. Webster's day. The kids have mostly grown up and there were one or two others I knew. You may remember Queenie Scott?" I nodded my head. "To the public she's Scotti's Hungarian Trio. Freddie Burge made his name in Swing, runs three bands and keeps race-horses. Kyrle Mason has charge of Church Music for the B.B.C." They were all names of people we had known in Academy days. He went on: "One or two of the big shots turn up, and not only them——"

He was becoming increasingly agitated and I said: "Come on, Will, out with it."

He faltered. "You know I was always keen on music for films." The effort was great, but he tried again. "The story with incidental music is as old as Homer, but so far they've only thought of shoving in slabs of Viennese Waltz and the 1812 Overture. In the States——" He fell silent. "Now——"

We walked twice up and down the lawn in silence until I said: "Who've you met?"

"Uxbridge."

"You mean Billy-boy?"

"He's Musical Director of Coloursounds Studios, at Elstree. They're going to make some frightful hash or other of Mary, Queen of Scots. He suggested——" He gulped. It was like playing midwife. I said:

"Take it quietly. What?"

"He wants me——" He turned on me savagely with dilated nostrils. "I shan't go to Marjorie's again. He wants me to write the introductory passage, the whole of the incidental music, and a song or two as well. I can't do it. I won't do it."

He was even trembling. I said: "Don't knock me down, but why not?"

He burst out: "Why, you fool, there's only one way to write it, and they'll be bound for some beastly reason or other to want it done differently. I couldn't bear to be told what to write. I only write now because I write what I like. Do they think I like riding a damned motor-cycle? But it makes me independent." He kicked a hole in the immaculate lawn and turned his back on it. "To be patronized, and corrected, and kept waiting, and perhaps in the end turned flat—it would be intolerable."

I felt that drastic measures were called for, and took his arm. I said: "Will, you're being an ass. This is the opportunity you've been working fifteen years for. The films are the idiom of our age. They are broad, simple stories on broad, simple themes of lust, brutality, crime and bloodshed, easily apprehended by the massmind. A part of Shakespeare's genius was that he adapted to his own use the idiom he found in vogue. Weren't Bach and Mozart conditioned by the demands of electors and petty kings? Your creative artist must write for his age so that he may become its voice. Today is unique. Never before have such multitudes been educated, here and in every country in civilization, to such heights of imbecility. You ought to be proud that you are alive to express it."

I continued more gently: "Besides, Will, you can't always funk your destiny by being a dispatch-rider. Hidden, you are useless. No one's heard of Will Holland. You may be writing the sweetest symphony in history, but who cares? What I remember of Billy-boy he couldn't manage a fish-shop, but if he's managing Coloursounds' music he's wiser than you. More, even if he never composed a bar, he's got more people listening to him."

No doubt I had impressed him. He noticed the hole he had made in the lawn and was much upset. "It's Rowley," he said. "That kid's always digging holes." And he brought soil from a border to level the hole. When he had risen he said: "All right. You can't be the wreck you make out. Look here——" We were interrupted by a tapping on the kitchen window and saw Charlotte waving to us within. Holland made answering salute and we moved off. Outside the kitchen door he said: "The fact is that I had a bit of a row with Billy-boy. I told him it was like his damned cheek."

"Tactful, aren't you!"

Almost nervously he asked: "I say, will you come with me next Sunday?"

I was dismayed. "How the deuce can I? Marjorie's my wife."

"She won't mind. You can go as a friend of mine." If Will had any humour it was of the deepest. He opened the the kitchen door, and as we went in he said: "She probably won't recognize you."

Charlotte had finished her ironing and prepared three large cups of coffee. She said: "If you want to get any work done, Will, you'd better go now."

Will said: "Harry says I ought to take it. He's going with me next Sunday." He then picked up one of the cups of coffee and left us, to go upstairs.

2

The scene that followed merges in the memory with others of its kind, in which the house, filled with vitality though it was, slumbered. In a small room upstairs Will wrote, sometimes having recourse to the muted piano of his Harlesden days. Hope and her brother, Rowley, slept in one bedroom, and Alice in the other. The stove hummed in the kitchen. In the front room Charlotte lay on a sofa sewing or knitting, while I sat in an arm-chair watching her.

On this first occasion the hearth was filled with lilac from the garden, but Charlotte, who always enjoyed warmth, had switched on the electric radiator. The only thing I recognized of Will's was the blurred photo of a woman in a long frock whom I had understood to be his mother, but I recognized a great deal that had belonged to Charlotte or to Charlotte's father—the sideboard, a bookshelf containing sundry volumes on the breeding of livestock, and the sofa she lay on. I should not have been very surprised to hear the old hit-and-miss footsteps coming up the path.

If I had ever tried to imagine what would happen when the three of us met again I had only conceived of scenes of passion, ending possibly in bloodshed and, worst of all, in a banged nose. I felt cheated when I found myself merely watching Charlotte mending Will's socks. Her character remained unchanged. My head was filled with conjectures about her marriage and Hope's paternity, but it would have been improper to ask, and Charlotte said nothing except now and then to titter when our talk approached the subject too nearly.

I looked upon the scene as an example of man's flight from the dramatic.

It transpired that the last birth had been difficult, and Charlotte was forced to rest as much as possible. I was glad to reach a rug for her and wrap it round her feet, knowing what warmth meant to her. I said: "How many nights a week is Will able to write nowadays? He used to manage five."

"It's still five."

"What do you think of it all?"

"It keeps him out of mischief."

It was a new reason for composing music. I took a cigarette from a silver box and lighted it. To be frank, I had hungered for it because lack of money had made me cut down cigarettes. She said: "That box was a wedding-present from Smith & Snelson's. Snelson himself organized the collection. Gratitude, perhaps, for the way Will treated poor Snyder."

"Will showed me the cutting about the proposals you both had."

"I thought they were very nice. I've kept mine. Twenty-eight proposals! I felt like an heiress."

"The cutting said you weren't at home."

"I went to an aunt's at Clacton. Father was furious." She tittered. "When I look back——! Father used to say: 'What the devil d'ye want to snub that young fellow Wilshaw for? He can play cards!' He only knew that I was mixed up in a row at the office. We even had a police inspector round, and Father blasted him to blazes and then made cocoa for him. I don't know which was sillier."

I could make very little of all this. Wishing to gain some information about Hope, I asked: "But why did you go away at all?"

She made no reply except to titter again and say: "The neighbours loved it. Will and I couldn't live there after that. Besides, Father was given the chance of setting up a trading post in Borneo. After Watford, he jumped at it."

She began to laugh again, and I laughed, too. I asked: "You've lived here ever since?"

"Goodness, no. We had furnished rooms at Alperton. Then Father gave us some of his furniture, and we went to a flat at Greenhill, behind the shops. Will was always in and out of the Labour Exchange. The Discharged Prisoners' Aid

Society wanted to help him, but Will thought that if they did he became too obviously a discharged prisoner. At one time he was managing a coffee-stall outside Wembley Stadium, and at another painting houses. Driving a motor-cycle's safe, but he doesn't like it."

"No?"

"The B.B.C. makes him so bad-tempered. If there were anyone to knock down he'd have knocked him down months ago. I wish he were in charge of the coffee-stall again."

"Who gave him the job?"

"Mr. Brazier next door—the trade-union man. His brother's one of the commissionaires." She began to titter again. I remembered her titters from old, and recognized in myself the old desire to throttle her. She said: "You would laugh. The first house we had to ourselves was on the new Goldrigge Estate, across the railway. There was only one cistern, and the kitchen chimney kept on falling down. Rowley was always ailing and Hope had rheumatic fever. One night Will prised up the floorboards and found things like cauliflowers growing underneath, so we left. The rents were collected for someone called Goldrigge living in Leipzig."

"You've had a pretty thin time."

She turned her eyes upon me. "Will's very good."

I was becoming more and more exasperated, and felt that I could not bear to hear her titter again. I blurted out: "I say, it's all right my visiting you again like this, is it? I mean, what are Will's ideas about me?"

Infallibly she began to titter: "Goodness, why not? We haven't seen you for ages."

I might have been a casual acquaintance like Severnake, and there might be no Hope—ten years had passed and she had given birth to three children, but she remained the same infuriating enigma. I could not conceal my agitation, stubbed out the cigarette and began to roam round the room. I was not helped by hearing her murmur: "You always were restless."

I felt that if I could not throttle her I must—but no! The idea was impossible. I refused to believe that after my long discipline of loneliness she had any power over me. How many times had I assured myself that no enigma existed and that she contained nothing! I looked at her. She was placidly knitting, her cheeks only slightly fuller, the wisps of new hair behind the ears just the same. The sight filled me with despair. Why did Marjorie not inspire me with the same emotions of joy and anguish?

I asked: " Which is Will's room? "

" The first on the left. He won't mind."

I left the room, shutting the door behind me, and found my legs trembling. The old warmth and longing had crept like an invisible enemy into my stomach. I imagined myself laying a hand on the door-knob, opening the door again and going into her. Even the damned room was the same as the captain's, and the sofa she occupied was the one we had occupied together. I turned myself forcibly away and went upstairs.

As I entered, Will was standing with his back to the door, turning over the leaves of a hand-written score all clef signs and hairpins. Abstractedly he said: " Hello." Will's monkish habits had followed him. As well as the shabby upright were the old green box, a narrow desk and a hardwood chair, but very little else, apart from books of reference. The window was open and the room was filled with the smell of lilac.

He turned round, wearing the old smile of creative excitement. He said: " I can't write a stroke. This Mary Queen of Scots idea has got hold of me. Do you recognize this? " And he turned to the piano and with one hand repeatedly played five or six notes in a minor key.

I replied: " It's one of those heart-rending Scots airs. At a rough guess, *The Flowers of the Forest*."

" It's the Scottish funeral march for pipes."

He played the notes again, with varying emphasis. I comprehended his excitement. He would take those few notes and convert them by the magic of instrumentation into songs of hope, triumph or despair, according to necessity. In his mind at that moment the conceptions were forming that would linger in the minds of men when they had forgotten the details of orchestration—which then had yet to be devised. The thought recurred that I might once have known a similar excitement.

I said: "Will, I can't come with you on Sunday," and because he took no notice I added: "The situation would be impossible."

He said: "All right," and went back to the hand-written score.

I went outside again, feeling old and ill. I had come prepared to help and had found content and fulfilment. I dared not think of Charlotte. Through one doorway I glimpsed tumbled forms sleeping in a darkened room, and through a second a wide bed spread with a smooth counterpane. It was too much. I went downstairs, intending to put on my hat and depart without farewell, but gave way to the temptation of opening the parlour door.

A murmur of swing was rising from a small radio set, a tango called *Don José, the Don I Adore*, the latest adaptation of *Zion's Towers*. There was nothing to say. I gazed once more upon the back of Charlotte's head and let my eye travel over her shoulders and bosom, and the stockingless legs sticking out of the print frock, all unchanged despite the passage of years. I wept for the lost opportunities of youth.

I said: "Still fond of the radio?"

"It's nice, after the children all day." She looked up in surprise. "Why, you're quite pale!"

I wanted to fling myself on my knees and bury my face in her breast.

Will came in softly, rubbing his hands together, and bent over her and kissed her cheek. He said: "It's a lament for the lost youth of Flodden. You know, this is *it*."

Charlotte replied: "I'm so glad."

I left almost immediately afterwards, resolving never again to visit the house, not only to escape torture, but so that Will should not again have to go to prison. On the next conviction for assault the sentence would be severer. Odours of soot and fish greeted me as I opened my back door, and the house echoed my movements like a mausoleum. In some mysterious way the past decade had stripped me to bankruptcy and given Will inestimable riches. I kicked the cat out of doors and in my perplexity took two aspirins and went early to bed.

I woke in the morning clear-headed, already beginning to ridicule my fears of the night before. Ten years had made me immune to Charlotte. The idea crept into my mind that I must sometime revisit her to prove that I was immune. After all, I had been invited to revisit them the following Sunday, before going with Will to Marjorie's.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

ALL THE following day I was filled with energy, and began a house-cleaning campaign by digging out of the cellar a set of chimney-sweep's brushes. Animated by love for Charlotte, I swept every chimney in the house. Old ideas and enthusiasms passed through my mind and everything I undertook, even to brushing the grime out of my finger-nails, I did as for Charlotte's benefit with a silent prayer: "There, that's for you." At the same time the voice of reason told me that all this was folly, that Charlotte was happily married to Will, and that it was madness to encourage the emotions struggling in my breast.

I had planned to sweep out the rooms on the following day, but instead shaved, put on clean linen and went to town. I had two purposes. In the first place I went to Somerset House, paid a shilling and filled up a form requesting that search be made for the registration of the birth of Hope Holland in the second or third quarter of 1925. I was told to return on the morrow, when, on payment of a further fee, a copy of the birth certificate would be given to me.

My second call was upon my Welsh friend, Nancy. If I was to revisit Charlotte I felt it politic to go empty of mere desire. I hadn't seen Nancy for a month and she was delighted to see me. I was reckless of money and spent two of my last notes dining her in style, after which she took me home. She had acquired a telephone, and her ambitions now rested in a small suite of two rooms and kitchenette, all with muslin curtains and plenty of mirrors. A move was also desirable for another reason. A fortnight previously she had given sanctuary to a spinster woman who had been the subject of unwelcome attentions on one of the landings. To her horror, Nancy had learnt that this woman was a welfare officer employed by the Society for the Redemption of Single Females, and she had pursued Nancy ever since with the object of making her sleep in a dormitory with nine other girls, and earn her living in a laundry. Nancy thought that this officer was paid a premium for every single female redeemed, and unfortunately the fifteen per cent she paid to the invisible Mr. Issuri did not protect her against this class of persecution.

Despite this shadow, however, we much enjoyed ourselves and parted on the morrow with reluctance.

At Somerset House I was given the copy of a birth certificate showing that Hope, the daughter of William Holland and Charlotte Holland, formerly Rhode, had been born on May 28th, 1925. I had parted from Charlotte on Euston Station in August 1924 and Will had not married her until three or four months later.

It was indisputable proof that Hope was my child.

2

In the days that intervened before my again visiting Charlotte, which was now established in my mind as the following Sunday, I attacked the house with even greater energy, assessing the quantities of paper and distemper needed to re-cover walls and ceilings, and spending valuable money on soap, soda and bath-brick. When the house was finished, there was the garden to put in order. Music rose in my heart, and for the first time since my marriage I began to put pen to paper.

I arrived early on Sunday afternoon, and, as before, brought my bicycle in by the side gate. Will was stooping over a flower-border while Charlotte was nodding over a newspaper in a basket-chair, surrounded by skipping ropes and painting books. I avoided looking at her, and distributed chocolate among the children. Hope accepted her share impersonally, as a cat might. Will took my arrival as a matter of course and only raised himself to say : " I've been at my desk since eight. You won't mind if we don't go ? "

I asked whether he was still busy with Mary, Queen of Scots, and he nodded his head. I asked : " But if you've had a row with Billy-boy, how d'ye know he'll still want it ? "

" I don't care whether he wants it or not. I'm doing it."

There was no arguing with him. I went across to where Charlotte was sitting, hardly daring to look at her. I was not immunized. There had never been any question of my being so. She raised her eyelids sleepily and said : " Isn't the spring sun marvellous ? I'll get tea in a minute."

I joined the children in their play and recaptured some of my old power over them. Such little effort was needed to win their gratitude, but Hope seemed to sense that I was trying to win her regard, and remained aloof.

We had tea under the plum tree, a clatter of spoons on saucers and chatter of childish voices, the whiff of bonfires and the sound of neighbours talking to one another as they planted potatoes and sowed peas.

I said : " This is all very pleasant, but we'll have to go to Marjorie's sometime."

Sitting on the grass with his gardening boots on, Will said : " Thought you didn't want to go ! "

I looked at Charlotte, who said : " I expect Will'll do as he pleases."

After tea, Will went upstairs, while I helped Charlotte to clear away and wash up. I was charmed, as though in a dream. Will might not have existed. A great business followed of preparing the children to go to the park, with faces to wash and clean sandals to put on. From his window Will waved good-bye to us. Nothing much passed between Charlotte and me. She walked stiffly with a half-smile on her face, inscrutable, or perhaps with no thoughts at all. We explored the children's playground, the swings, the roundabout and the iron see-saw, and went to watch a cricket match.

She told me more about the Goldrigge Estate, that the difficulties of her last confinement might be attributed to it, but that the doctors did not care to say so. What had finally decided them to move was not so much the cauliflowers as that Irish families had moved into the estate who were not above tearing out the banisters to use for fuel. Her words enchanted me. The thrushes whistled louder, the pitch looked greener and the cricketers bounded more fleetly than ever before.

Experience murmured that she was incapable of responding to my emotions, but I felt sure that she must. Hope suddenly darted away, and we saw Will approaching us over the sward. I was so far removed from reality that I greeted him with pleasure. He was written out, conscious of having done as much as he could, but gloomy about its value. He was in no mood to watch cricketers, and I rose and walked with him between the elms. He told me frankly that he had been shocked at my appearance on seeing me that first evening, but that I didn't look so bad by day.

He asked: " Are you really short of the ready to pay rates ? "

" Truthfully. I'm right down to it."

" What are you going to do ? "

" I don't know. Nothing."

" Don't talk soft." He took thought and said: " We'll go to Marjorie's, if only for your sake. Someone's bound to want you."

I protested that I didn't want work, wouldn't go to Marjorie's, and refused to trade on being Marjorie's husband, but at that moment Hope skipped across to show him a ladybird cooped inside her fist. After a while I said: " Look here, Will, why're you taking this interest in me ? After Smith & Snelson's you can't love me very much."

He flushed heavily and mumbled: " It was ten years ago. You looked awful the other day, not just destitute, but lonely," and he awkwardly waved his hand to indicate Charlotte and the tumbling children. " I've got so much."

Dew began to fall, the thrushes came down from the elms to forage on the turf, and Charlotte rose and said that she must go.

On the way home, now and then retrieving a ball from the wheels of traffic, Will threw off some of his gloom. I remarked cautiously that it was strange to find a musician driving a motor-cycle for the B.B.C. and was answered furiously: " Nothing of the sort. Any worth-while artist must have independence. The ideal occupation would be plumbing, but it's a technical profession requiring three years' apprenticeship. What otherwise should I do for them ? Write ? Don't be a fool. They appoint committees to turn down anything new sent in to them."

" Why so bitter ? "

" Because the B.B.C. was set up to be a patron of the arts, and it's become a refuge for every failed writer and composer.

Can you imagine a deaf, half-witted oaf like Beethoven waiting at the reception desk? What would that barrage of polite females have said to Voltaire? There's no limit to stupidity when it's backed by the State."

Doubtless he would have said more, but Charlotte turned round with the remark: "You shouldn't have got him talking about that, Harry. He won't sleep tonight." Will smiled self-consciously, but it appeared that the outburst had done him good, for, on reaching home, he made tea for himself and went upstairs again, whistling.

Charlotte and I spent our evening much as on the last occasion. I did not wish to break out of my trance, said very little, and simply gazed my fill of Charlotte as she lay knitting. Nancy had by no means lulled desire. There was no sense in my falling in love with her. One falls in love with the widow on the liner or the girl in the railway carriage, not with a married woman of thirty-seven with three children. Yet I reflected that if the pangs I suffered were those of unrequited love then at last I understood why music was written.

They were thoughts that recurred to me many times in the months that followed. I abandoned the fiction that I was immunized, and visited the Holland's as often as twice a week. I brought presents for the children, gave Will encouragement and ideas, and did not allow myself within three feet of Charlotte. I knew by the temperature of my blood that a crisis was inescapable. I loved her, she had born me a child and I saw her married to Will.

No humiliation was spared me. I saw her in her dressing-gown with hair tied up and face creamed, locking up for Will, who had already gone to bed. I saw her kiss him to comfort him when his composition had gone badly. I saw him touch her breast and smile at her.

Holland's nemesis had stolen upon me sideways. Nancy had grown a little fond of me, apart from the fact that it was her profession to do so, but her embrace was that of a ghost. Painting the house was as useless. Having renovated the interior, I borrowed a ladder and furiously attacked the outside, painted it twice, cleaned out the gutters and gave up only to look for a spade. All was useless. I went to bed exhausted, and a voice kept me awake crying: "Charlotte! Charlotte!"

3

Adult and experienced though I now was, I didn't realize at first what was happening to me. I knew only that I was in a state of unrest and perplexity, which I did not associate with the word love. I doubt whether anyone can be sufficiently critical of himself to say: "I am in love." To be in love is to be without the critical faculty. Either someone else makes the diagnosis or an external event brings it to light.

With me, this external event was our visit to Marjorie's. Five weeks had passed before we had encouraged one another to the point of making it. I went in a mood of exhilaration, for not only was this my first meeting with Marjorie since our separation, but it was also my first appearance in society. Hope swelled within me of finding the Webster girls fulfilling the bright promise of their youth.

The day was one of strong sun and high wind and, because skirts were worn longer in those days, having dropped five inches from the knee-high vogue, the scene on the Websters' lawns was one of verve and brilliance. No doubt Marjorie had been putting her money to good use, for the house was newly painted, the garden trim and the interior less shabby than I ever remembered it.

The back of the house was still at the front. When we had entered the drive we found the lawns and shrubberies peopled with children, either playing "he", sleeping under a striped awning or tumbling about in pens, according to stage of growth. In charge of them was the nurse, still in pink uniform and starched cuffs notwithstanding that she was also Mrs. Webster's widowed step-mother. The glance she threw us, which intimated that she was handsome and we males, eclipsed all memory of Cusbeck.

On the other side of the house tea was in progress, a hazardous business only partly sheltered from the wind by a high wall. Frocks were billowing, hands flying to straw hats, and storms beating up in teacups.

I saw Marjorie at once, clad in scarlet silk with bold whirligigs of black. I thought she looked florid and matronly, but my heart jumped with pleasure. She waved excitedly, and I didn't at first realize that she was not waving to me but to Will. Almost at once she broke away to greet us and had come within five yards of us when she recognized me. Her hand went to her lips and she exclaimed : " Oh, Harry ! He's brought you. You do look different—thinner. You were always chubby. But you look quite well and happy. I'm not sure that I approve. It's disrespectful to my memory."

Almost without knowing what we were about, we kissed. I was embarrassed, but not she. She was too travelled. I saw that her old charming effusiveness had become a mannerism. She laughed and turned to Will. " My own husband ! I'm so glad you brought him. You were naughty to have stayed away. Billy-boy's asked for you every time. There he is."

Someone else attracted her attention, an exotic creature whose hair glinted like silver paper. " Louise, you remember Harry, don't you ? And Freddie Burge—Freddie, this is my husband. I've only just recognized him. Isn't it exciting—our first meeting after centuries."

I shook hands with Louise and the celebrated Freddie. In her youth she had been dark and roguish, but since then she had been stranded penniless with a baby in Kentucky, and now she was blonde and fully capable of rousing even the jaded interest of a band-leader.

I passed on with disquiet. The crowded scene was like a cinema show, lifelike but a play of shadows. I saw that the baby Agnes was now a slim girl attired for the occasion in the muslin trousers of a sultana. Will had disappeared; Marjorie, too. Will had come with the intention of avoiding Billy-boy, and, if by accident he met him, of quarrelling with him.

Mrs. Webster was seated in a corner, and peremptorily beckoned me. I had expected her to grow old serenely and plumply, but she had bobbed her hair and turned lean. Even worse, she had made my mother's mistake of cultivating her intelligence at the expense of her charity. She greeted me: " Why, Harry, what's happened to you? Have you been burying your talents in the ground? "

We shook hands and I dropped on the seat beside her. " Yes. I've turned monk."

" But why? Wasn't Marjorie good enough? "

I restrained a smile. " Too good, but the word has many connotations."

Someone handed me a cup of tea. Mrs. Webster began to press for reasons, saying that Marjorie, too, was evasive, and I began to regret that I had not been guilty of cruelty or adultery, which were easy to explain. She concluded: " Men have it all their own way. That's what makes them beastly." I began to protest, but she indicated Marjorie and said: " You should have left her to Will. Now you've ruined both."

" Charlotte's a darling. She's given him just the happiness he needed for his work."

" She would have done very well for a postman."

This was the kind of clever remark I would have expected from Mother, but Mrs. Webster had good excuse for being embittered, for she had been deserted with seven children, and I did not reply. I asked where Marion was, the child who had come cycling over to Stonegrove to play the fiddle in my quintets, and was answered that she was somewhere about and had blasted a brilliant career by marrying a country schoolmaster.

I rose and wandered off, haunted by the presence of wasted years. Marjorie crossed my path again and I asked her:

"Whose are all those babies on the front lawn? The Swedish soprano's?"

She giggled back. "Gracious, Father's been married twice since her. One's hers and one's a coloraturo-soprano's. We're very proud of him. Two of the others are Louise's, and two you wouldn't know about. Are you enjoying yourself? I want to talk to you."

She introduced me to Juliet, the only woman present, apart from the cook, to be wearing her hair long. On one side of her stood the first violin of a famous orchestra and on the other Freddie Burge's alto sax. She said: "How are you? I remember you," and passed on with her attendants falling into step behind her.

I recalled the slim child in white cutting the cake at her engagement party, and wept.

I walked to the far end of the garden, feeling my exhilaration give way to bewilderment. I was in search of something, and didn't know what. I thought of Charlotte. The memory of her as we had left her an hour before, seated in the garden with her feet on a hassock, dozing, was more real to me than anything I had met that afternoon. They were so like ghosts that I felt I could poke a finger through them.

There, behind a damson tree, I found the despised Marion, seated in a dowdy maternity frock side by side with her husband, watching the antics of a blue-tit picking greenfly off the new leaves. When she heard me she hastily dropped his hand, and a blush rose to her cheeks. I wanted to stay with them and did in fact, exchange half a dozen words, but their shyness excluded me.

I turned away, reassured. I was almost inspired. This life of marriage and children born of marriage suddenly appeared to me as a revelation, a truth that ought to be more widely known.

It was then, I suppose, that I realized that I was in love with Charlotte, not simply in the sense that I desired her, which had always been true, but that I ought to have married her, fathered her children, and given her the home and protection Will had given her.

4

There was no purpose in staying longer, and I was sneaking through the house on my way out when I overheard Will's voice raised in argument. Arguing with Will was no light matter. I feared the worst and found it in the living-room. Billy-boy, a lean and serious young man with tinted spectacles, had his back to the grand piano in an attitude of self-defence. His heavy brows contorted with passion, Will was thumping the piano-top with his fist as though he were driving in nails.

I was in time to hear him ask: "Who the blazes is Solomons?"

"But I've told you. Solomons is an authority on Scots airs."

"But who *is* he?"

Billy-boy replied patiently: "Solomons is the director. Everyone's heard of Solomons."

Will turned to me. "This idiot says they've already decided against *Flowers of the Forest*. They're going to have *Bonny Mary of Argyll*." He almost shouted: "Good God above, *Bonny Mary of Argyll*! Why, the thing's absolutely finite. You can do nothing with it." He seated himself at the piano and played the air. "What sort of variations can you make out of that? But some damned carpenter or other——!" He banged the lid down and got up to go.

I interposed. "You should hear his *Flowers of the Forest*, Billy. It's terrific." Will had grudgingly shown me a page or two of his score. Billy-boy patiently turned to me. I went on: "It'll make the film. People'll remember it when they have forgotten what it belongs to." To Will I said: "Show him what I mean, Will."

"I'm damned if I do."

"—The opening passage, after you change key."

Will sat down and played. I murmured to Billy-boy: “ Don’t let him scare you. His heart’s in it. He’ll shoot himself if you don’t look at it.”

Billy-boy said: “ But——”

I interrupted: “ Do what I say. You can horsewhip me if I’m wrong.”

Billy-boy replied: “ I haven’t seen you for years. All right.”

When Will had finished, I said: “ He’s convinced. We’ll pack up what you’ve done and let him try it out.” Will began to protest, but I took his arm and soothed him. “ Give the poor fellow a chance to catch his own breath.” I smiled at Billy-boy. All was well. We moved towards the door, feeling the relief of sailors who have ridden out a typhoon.

The day had not yet done with me, for we found Marjorie in the passage, looking suspiciously nervous. She said: “ Oh, there you both are. Harry——” and she moved with us to the front door. Billy-boy went the other way. Marjorie murmured: “ Harry, is it quite out of the question?—I mean about the divorce.”

I glanced at her. Will was behind her, curiously alert. I couldn’t make him out. I replied: “ But, my dear, why? ” She appealed to Holland with her eyes. I said: “ There are no grounds. You might get a separation, but I hope you won’t— I want to go on visiting you now I’ve begun. Do you want to marry someone else? ”

It was one of those crucial conversations that spring up so casually but mean so much. She replied nervously: “ No, not at all. It’s so absurd, that’s the only thing. You could have the house.”

To support her, Will said: “ It surprises me that a chap like you can live alone.”

I lost my confidence talking to Will. He was Charlotte’s husband. I replied: “ But I assure you that there’s no one else. I have lived happily by myself for eight years, which is not sufficient grounds, even under the 1937 Act.”

I gulped and Marjorie, too, found her emotions too much for her, for tears came to her eyes and she turned away. " There's nothing more to be said, then."

She took Will's arm and they moved off down the long hall, while I left the house for the sunshine and the lawn full of children.

Charlotte had moved out of the sun into the back room, and together we listened to the third part of a radio adaptation of *Daniel Deronda*, in twelve weekly parts. In Will's absence I had the illusion that Charlotte was my wife and Will's home mine. I wanted nothing more than to go on listening to *Daniel Deronda* indefinitely. Will arrived about eight and we had supper in the kitchen, talking about *Flowers of the Forest*. That chap had never had any passion apart from music.

5

About three weeks later I glanced out of the window to see someone other than the milkman and the baker's roundsman coming up the front path. A car was parked under the horse-chestnut. I couldn't remember receiving a visitor since Ethel and hastened to open the front door.

It was Billy-boy, burdened with a brief-case which he unstrapped as he walked through the house and into the garden. " It's this," he said humbly. " Will's *Flowers of the Forest*. I wanted to know if you'd do the arranging from Will's short score."

I looked at him suspiciously. His tinted glasses hid him so that one was not to know what qualities were concealed by them, or by his diffidence and slow speech. I said: " You aren't taking it, are you ? "

" It'll do."

" What's the authority on Scots airs got to say about it ? "

" He was very decent." The ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. " He was only worried that Novello's or someone had the copyright on the original air."

"But surely Coloursounds have got a dozen hack copyists waiting to do it, haven't they?"

"Will said you were the only one who knew how his mind worked. You know what he is."

I grudgingly accepted the manuscript. "I'm up to the eyes, but I daresay I can manage it."

When he had gone I hurried to open the parcel, although with the impression that Will was behind me with fists raised in fury that I dared to touch it. Excitement seized me. I sat down there and then to begin work, sometimes rising to try out a passage on the piano. Evidently he had been given guidance in the technique applying to films and the special requirements of *Mary, Queen of Scots*, but otherwise it was wholly Holland in character, conceived as a whole and precise in detail, powerful, austere and, in these days of undiscipline, cut to the last note.

Here, I thought, lay the dual life of the artist, a bundle of handwritten pages in no way connected with the fellow who had twice gone to prison, married Charlotte and now drove a motorcycle for the B.B.C.

Impelled by fear of Will, I did the job quickly and expertly, rarely stirring from the house. Billy-boy had everything back within three weeks. Though Will must have longed to hear my opinion, he never mentioned the subject when next I visited him. I told Charlotte what had happened, however, and that the thing was first-rate. A few days later I had a cheque for fifty guineas from Coloursounds. I might have been indignant had not Billy-boy called about the same time and apologetically asked for my help with other matters of the same kind. The fellow had fingers in all sorts of pies. I thus found myself insidiously supplied with an income.

6

Summer advanced to its height. I was lulled into a permanent state of longing. Since Hope was my child, why was mention never made of my old association with Charlotte? She didn't comport herself as a woman with a secret. Far from it. She seemed deeply content. Nor did Will show any reluctance to leave me alone with her. His interests were elsewhere, for the filming of *Mary, Queen of Scots* was in full swing, and he was constantly being chivvied to re-write this passage or that, to interpolate fresh material or to scrap old. Moreover, he had been commissioned to prepare the score for an extravaganza called *King of Swing*, against his will because he wanted to write a violin concerto. It seemed almost as though he would soon have to give up motor-cycling, a step from which he recoiled because it meant sacrificing his independence.

The tides of the body are difficult to describe for often they go undetected, even by the body's owner, but in September I reached a crucial stage in my relations with Charlotte.

The occasion was Rowley's birthday. Will should have been present, but on reaching home had gone to Elstree. When the small celebration was over and the two youngest put to bed, I met Charlotte coming out of the bathroom with a floor-cloth in her hand, having just wiped up after the communal bath. She was brushing away a lock of hair with her wrist, and in the dim reflected light was irresistible. I could not restrain myself from putting my arms round her and, having kissed her, from kissing her again to silence her.

The children were making a rumpus across the landing. She looked at me in wonder. " Do you still love me as much as that, Harry? "

I took a long breath and found myself trembling. " Yes, it's just the same."

Absent-mindedly she again tried to brush away the lock of hair. Averting her face, she said: " I'm so sorry. I'd thought we'd finished with it all." She turned her face away and I saw fear in it. " But what shall we do? It's impossible. Besides, I don't want——" To my amazement tears started to her eyes and rolled one by one down her cheeks. " Oh, Harry, all that unhappiness! "

Her grief and gentleness made me release her, and a moment later Hope came running indoors crying: "Mummy! Mummy!" I went downstairs and, after allowing myself five minutes in which to take control of my limbs, I pushed my bicycle out and went home. All my upbringing was in revolt. The next step was biblically known as adultery, a crime which had been condemned by every law-giver from Moses to a London magistrate the day before. Yet somehow an abstract law didn't seem to apply to Charlotte and me.

I continued to visit her without pretending that I did so to avoid having Will enquire why I didn't, but because I had abandoned myself to fate. Upbringing, Moses, gratitude, fear of the unhappiness that must follow, were swept away in the flood of desire. This, I thought, was passion, as advertised. I was never more wretched in my life.

I was in the house one evening when Will, who had worked at his desk too long and gone out to pull up bean-poles, returned indoors at twilight in a better humour and mentioned casually, sitting on the kitchen table drinking tea, that on the next day the B.B.C. were sending him to Daventry, where he would probably have to spend the night. By coincidence, all three children were to be absent then as well, under Marjorie's wing. They loved nothing better than a visit to Marjorie's, and three more children could be absorbed into her establishment without difficulty—to be accurate, I had never yet learned how many children were its normal complement.

Charlotte remarked that in that case she would go to Oxford Street to buy sheets. She was embarrassed by the quantities of money coming into the house, and felt compelled to spend some of it. I suggested that I should go with her. Apparently both heard me, but no objection was raised. Will continued to swing his legs, and said that he was glad they had managed to bottle so many tomatoes. Charlotte rose and reached down a tin of biscuits. That was all.

The next day was warm and cloyed with the scents of autumn. Charlotte made no comment when I arrived. She had put on a new and expensive coat, and needed only to lock up the house and bang the front door behind her. She was even glad to have my company, and in the train chattered like a schoolgirl. I found it very difficult to feel guilty. We bought the sheets and, under temptation, a pair of house-sandals, besides toys for the children. Her character remained true even in shopping. The assistant had only to assure her that the dearer sandals would last twice as long, for her blindly to buy them. We had lunch at Buszards, which was a little out of her sphere. The afternoon and evening lay empty before us. I put my hand on hers and said :

" I've never dared to go back to Hampton Court without you."

We left her parcels at Victoria and took train to Hampton Court. I had no villainous motive in taking her there, and no more prosaic journey was ever passed by man and woman. She talked about the children, remarking that Hope would be trying for a scholarship next year and how like his father Rowley was, all the while playing with her wedding-ring, forgetful that on our last visit she had been wearing mine.

Her legs pained her if she walked any distance, and we decided that a visit to the State Apartments ten years ago would easily suffice for another ten years, and went to sit by the river. The day's warmth induced a gentle melancholy, and I told her about my father's death. My arm had gone round her shoulders and she lay upon it with exquisite but uncomfortable pressure. I could not believe that she was lying there again. In the end I kissed her cheek. She turned her face away and sat up, but not in anger. With difficulty she began to tell me about her own father.

She said : " As soon as I got back from the holiday at your mother's house I gave in my notice to Snyder. Of course, Father wanted to know why. I was dreadfully unhappy at the time, besides being ill. I had a week to serve, and Will found out from someone. It was then that I first realized he was in love with me. Everyone else was either angry or inquisitive—

Snyder, Father, Severnake and all of them. I had no one on my side, except Will. At the time it seemed funny that all the while another boy in the office had been in love with me—I mean, as well as you. He'd asked me to marry him——"

I interrupted: "Honestly, Charlotte, do you know what it is to love?"

But she only replied: "Don't be silly. Snyder gave me that awful letter at the end of the week, and Father found it. I had always thought that he went through my things. I didn't see him come in to the office, but, you know, my office was next to Snyder's." She began to giggle. "He actually clouted Snyder with his stick. All the office heard Snyder shout. Will was the only one to get up and go to Snyder's help. Then I suppose Father told Will what it was all about. You never heard such a shindy. I was terrified, and one or two of the typists screamed. Will lifted Snyder out of his office, pitched him down the stairs and then punched him in the face—not just once. It was really rather terrible, for poor Snyder hadn't done anything.

"I went home after that. When Father came back I told him that I was going to have a baby."

It was her first confession of the fact. She said it as though I already knew, and of course I did. I murmured: "Good heavens!" And after a while: "What happened?"

"He wouldn't believe me. He knew that Snyder hadn't so much as kissed me. He couldn't think of anyone else. I remember that it was six o'clock, for he had badgered me up to my room and I had locked the door, when Will arrived. Father immediately thought that Will was at the bottom of it. I had to go down and then, of course, Will got to know. Will always puzzled me." She turned her face to mine and assured me seriously: "Honestly, to this day I don't know anything about him. Even then he didn't go for me. He didn't so much as ask a single question. He put his arm round my shoulders and told Father that he was going to marry me. Father was so angry that he put his foot through the glass bookcase and smashed his tobacco jar. Will didn't say a word, but just kept his arm round me. In the end Father left the house and Will said: 'It's all right, isn't it?' and I nodded my head. He kissed me and then went after Father. Will told me later that they ended up in the Albion Hotel."

She began to pluck grass and smiled tenderly. But the tenderness was not for me, but from memory of Will's loyalty. I said: "Let's go and find some tea," and I helped her to her feet and took her arm. It was only proper that we should go to the hotel where we had stayed before. I asked: "But did Will never ask you?"

"Things moved so quickly. On the evening before the wedding he found the police waiting at his lodging. He slept the night in a cell. I thought it was a bit high-handed, but Will told me afterwards that he had been in their hands before." She turned to me and tittered: "Fancy Will an old lag!"

I admitted that in the light of common sense it seemed ridiculous. I said: "But when he came out—it must have been two or three months."

"Four," she said placidly. "I suppose it was enough for him that I was in the worst plight a girl could be. I'd gone to Clacton, but he found me and married me straight away. At first he found it difficult to get a job. He was sorting rags for a while at the paper-mills." She laughed. "Funny to look back on."

I insisted: "But has he never asked about Hope?"

"No, but I daresay he knows all right. He was an unwanted child himself."

"Even so——"

"You don't know Will. Look what you were when he found you! It's just like him." We arrived at the hotel and she stood on the threshold with a smile on her lips. "Hope! I do so miss her. I suppose Marjorie'll remember to put a glass of water by her bedside. It's her tonsils."

Evidently the hotel had recently changed hands, for the paint glistened newly, the foyer had been rearranged and the restaurant had been given tubular furniture. The place was empty, even of waiters, and we were a long time being served. I said mischievously: "I wonder if they still call the bedrooms after Jane Seymour and Anne Boleyn!"

She gazed round. "Wasn't it awful, that Easter! Ever since I've tried to forget how unhappy I was. Shall I tell you something?" Her voice fell to a whisper. "I've always been terrified that something frightful will happen to me because of it!"

At last a waiter looked in and was astonished to see us, and I ordered tea. Charlotte said: "I'm rather enjoying myself. Will must have been very much in love with me. I've always wanted to tell someone. I never dreamt that it would be you."

We fell silent. I was disappointed that the hotel had changed its character. The same passions moved me as when I had rung up the reception desk to ask for another room. Indeed, I had inflamed them by revisiting the place, and the charity and fortitude of Charlotte's story were only more things to be swept aside.

I asked her: "Don't you infuriate him?"

She was puzzled. "I don't believe he thinks about me enough. Music's the only thing that makes him cross."

I said: "Charlotte, a perfectly wicked idea has just entered my head. Let me take that room again for the two of us—the Jane Seymour. If we go home you'll only be in the house by yourself." I took her hand across the table and tried to tell her how desperately I wanted her, but I could only mumble: "Charlotte! Charlotte!"

She replied: "I don't suppose they call it the Jane Seymour room any longer."

I had to release her hand because the waiter arrived with the tea. I asked him: "Do they still call the bedrooms here Jane Seymour, Anne Boleyn and so on?"

Holding a jug of milk, his old veined hands hovered over the table as he replied: "Why, no, sir, not for years. Some of the guests didn't like it with them queens being beheaded, and that."

He went away, and Charlotte said: "There you are." And she inspected the tea-table. "I love anchovies."

"Will never loved you as I did. Don't you remember?"

She took the lid off the teapot and stirred the tea. "There's so much talk about love. Here am I, a mother with three children, and when I see a story with the word 'love' in it I put it down because I know I shan't understand it." She exclaimed: "Oh, Harry, why don't you find someone else to love?"

I said savagely: "I have—a Welsh girl who spoke to me in the Edgware Road. She knows all about it. It's her profession. But——" I began to falter because I didn't know myself why I longed for Charlotte, even while Nancy was in my arms.

Charlotte was horrified. "Well, Harry! Of all the things to say over a tea-table! Does anybody else know? I suppose it comes of living alone." Then with a cunning look she asked: "What's she like?"

I replied: "You mustn't eat all the anchovy. Let's see if we can rouse that waiter to get some more toast."

Only when we had finished tea and I had paid the bill did I turn to her, as we stood by the window looking at the river, and murmur: "Charlotte darling, we can still take that room. Let me, Charlotte!"

She turned away. When I caught up with her she said: "Harry, it frightens me, the idea. I know harm will come, only thinking about it. I want to go home. Please take me home."

We arrived home about eight and I followed her into the house as though nothing had happened. She at once went into the kitchen and began to undo the parcels, only stopping to say: "Be an angel, Harry, and get my slippers. My feet are dead."

She smoothed the sheets and began to wrap up the toys again, while I put on the kettle. We had supper in silence.

My heart was heavy, but hope would not die. She said: "Isn't the house quiet!" and went in to the front room to switch on the radio. I followed her. When she turned round, she whispered: "Don't, Harry—please don't!" but I put my arms round her and held her. She fell limp and I kissed her.

We heard a motor-cycle coming down the road and Charlotte raised her head and said: "It's Will." The cycle stopped with the familiar splutter and hiss. Charlotte ran to open the back door. I heard her crying: "Oh, Will, how lovely, you're back! We've been to Hampton Court, and it's been glorious. Look, I've bought the sheets——"

Will's voice replied: "The sidecar wheel's got a slow puncture. Thought you'd be lonely without the kids."

They neither of them took any notice of me. Charlotte was especially attentive to Will. Normally they exchanged few signs of affection, but now Charlotte hung on to his arm. I could not make myself leave, but hung on to the point when Will followed Charlotte upstairs. Then I banged the front door behind me, and from the top of the street saw the light through the bedroom curtains.

Will's visits to Daventry became a weekly routine. About a month later Charlotte was again left by herself in the house, with the difference that Hope was at home so that she should not miss school. My visits had been infrequent because of the anguish they gave me. I knew that this time there was no chance of Will returning unexpectedly, because he had only set out about four. Indeed, I myself had watched him set out before going on home.

I returned about ten and saw a light in the kitchen. I left my bicycle at the front of the house and scratched on the back door as I had once scratched on the door of Charlotte's bedroom. Charlotte herself opened it. She was in dressing-gown and slippers, brewing cocoa. She asked: "Why, Harry, what's the matter?" and broke off to run to the gas stove. "There. The milk's boiled over."

I said: "Charlotte, it's no use. I love you, and that's all there is to it."

She exclaimed: "But I know. Have you come all the way from Edgware to tell me that again?"

She was wiping up the mess made by the boiling milk. I went up to her and took her arm. "Charlotte, have pity on me. I want you. I'm sick with thinking about you."

There may have been tears in my eyes, and in any case they wouldn't focus. She gazed at me in wonder, and I went on my knees with my face in the folds of her dressing-gown. At the time she was trying to pour what milk remained into a mug. She must have put the saucepan down, for I felt her hand reach down to my ear. She said: "But it's no use, Harry. I'm going to have a baby. Will's fearfully cross."

I rose to my feet. She exclaimed: "Poor Harry, you look terrible," and rose on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "There, I'm so sorry."

I said: "But I thought you mustn't have any more!"

"That's just it. The doctor's cross, too." She giggled. "As though doctors can be with you all the time! There's just enough milk for another mug, if you'd like it."

We stayed chatting for half an hour or more. The doctor had already booked a bed at the hospital on the hill. There was nothing much else to talk about except that Will's dislike of night trips to Daventry would soon force him to throw the job up, especially as it meant leaving Charlotte alone in the house. Before going, I leaned over to kiss her forehead. "It'll be all right, my dear."

"Of course it will. Will's longing to see what his third baby's like, really."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

After that I visited Will's regularly until the day of Charlotte's confinement. Because this happened unexpectedly, a week before prognosticated, and only an hour before I arrived with a punnetful of raspberries from the Stonegrove garden, I found the house in disorder and willingly agreed to stay the night. I had so far been accepted into the household that, with Hope's help, I was able to prepare supper for all of us, and by the time Will returned, about eight, have the three children tucked up in bed.

Will was preoccupied. He looked in at me where I sat reading by an open window, grunted, and went upstairs. But in an hour he was down again, saying that he hadn't written a note. This, too, I thought natural. Unusually talkative, he said: "These confounded summer nights. It was hot as hell in the ward."

At half-past ten the sky was still light, the last blackbird was calling half a mile away, the air was warm and serene. Will called me upstairs to see the children, who had thrown off the bedclothes and were lying fast asleep in abandoned attitudes with beads of perspiration on their noses. We went downstairs and turned on the radio. Freddie Burge's Fireworks were playing "Don José, the Don I Adore". Will said: "We've compassed the ether to hear that."

We walked to the top end of the garden where, through the branches of the plum-tree laden with little green plums, we admired the jade vase of the western sky. Four gardens away we heard the strains of "Don José" pouring through someone's kitchen window.

I asked: "I suppose she wants more children, does she?"

"I don't know what she wants. I've never known the first thing about her."

We returned to the house, Will stooping every now and then to twitch out a weed. "Who'd have thought that the three of us would come all this way from Smith & Snelson's!"

I said: "I've often wondered what happened to my old landlord, Powner. Do you remember? He had a son who was a sailor."

"I can tell you. I met him over a year ago. His son had returned but gone away leaving a wife behind, a native of Chihuahua. Nobody could understand a word she said, and she had the temper of a bramble bush. Not only that, but she'd got a baby, a girl. That made four of them onto him. He'd taken to sleeping in the shop."

Even Will laughed. He picked up the evening paper, but put it down again and we began to walk up and down the lawn, traversing as we did so the yellow rectangle thrown by the parlour light.

A woman's voice called over the blackberry hedge: "How is she, Mr. Holland? I saw the ambulance."

"She's pretty comfortable, thanks. The heat's against her, that's all."

Footsteps retreated. We continued our walk. Will said: "I'm sorry I gave up motor-cycling. It gave me ideas, in time with the engine. Luckily it was a four-stroke. The best of them came between Hemel Hempstead and Bicester. It might be worth my while to buy a bike and go that way every afternoon."

"I haven't heard you say much about *King Swing*."

His voice became charged with passion. "D'you know why? I can't do it. Looking back, you can see that *Mary, Queen of Scots* exactly suited my style. I used to lay it down as a principle that I wouldn't turn my nose up at anything in music. But this—Solomons wants all the stops out, all the time. And another thing——" He took my arm. "That dancer who's starring in it, Anna Belanna—she and her body remind me of a kid with a new toy. I don't know about you, but going to bed with a strange woman, however beautiful, revolts me. I'm packing up. The fact is"—he almost whispered in his excitement—"Marjorie wants to work me in with Jones!"

"Jones—Jones?"

"Raffael Jones. You know, British-Emmanuels Ltd. Coloursounds are a whelk-stall beside British-Emmanuels. They're planning a series of five all-English films. The first is about the navy—Raleigh. I could do Raleigh. *Mary, Queen of Scots* was a mere apprenticeship for Raleigh."

We returned inside the house and he wiped his forehead. "Do you think some tea——? The Sister said she'd phone if I were needed."

"My dear fellow, she's had three children before."

I made tea without troubling to turn on the light, and was reminded by the blue flares of gas how I had made tea by gaslight in Charlotte's house. Will was more friendly than I had ever known him, hanging about me like a stray cat. He confessed that he hadn't eaten since lunch, and I opened a tin of lobster and made sandwiches for both of us. I said: "Our rules don't apply in Anna Belanna's world. Moving between the two worlds might be very difficult. Were you ever unfaithful, Will?"

He replied: "I needed all my courage to ask my own wife."

I turned the gas out and we were alone in the dark. By now the sky was a luminous royal blue, and the fruit trees stirred out of their sleep to whisper and fall silent again.

I poured out the tea and put Will's cup by his elbow. I murmured: "Will, I've never dared to ask you before. Did you know that Hope was my child?"

He stirred like the fruit trees and looked at me. "If you say so. It was enough for me that she was Charlotte's child. At times I tried to rouse some indignation, but it didn't seem to me to matter very much."

"But suppose Hope were ever to find out!"

"Tell her if you want to. It wouldn't make any difference." He felt that further explanation was needed and made an effort. "It's one of these fallacies you're brought up on. Technically you may be her father, or the man next door, but I'm the man she's relied upon and seen her mother relying upon. She'd probably be offended."

I began to stammer: "I was a beast. Charlotte wrote me saying that everything was all right. I tried to find her. Honestly, Will——"

He rose and opened the back door and sat on the step with his tea beside him. "Your conscience is your own affair. I wish you'd shut up."

I felt hurt and went into the front room to make up a bed on the divan. Charlotte had told me that with the other three children labour had not lasted more than a few hours, and I didn't bother to take off more than shoes and jacket. I had pulled a rug over myself when the phone bell rang. Will answered it immediately, said: "All right," and replaced the receiver. He had taken his shoes off and came into my room like a ghost. "They want me to go up there." Something in his voice made me throw off the rug and go to his side.

"You'd better borrow my bike."

He muttered: "That damned Goldrigge house is at the bottom of it. I ought never to have taken her there." He put on his shoes again and went outside. "Which is the back brake? I shan't be able to get any writing done for a week."

I saw him go off and went back to the divan, murmuring: "Poor Charlotte, poor Charlotte!" The presence of the three children overhead gave me a sense of responsibility. I had worked hard that day on a Coloursounds score and was not so much drowsy as heavy-headed. I moved into sleep as though into a forest, feeling shapes thicken and close round me.

At some indeterminate hour later I woke, still oppressed with sleep, and heard Will moving about the kitchen, putting the kettle on and washing out his cup and saucer. I wanted to go and speak to him, but my limbs were too leaden. I may have drowsed off again, but woke as Will passed my door on his way upstairs.

"How is she?"

"She's dead."

I heard him moving about in the children's room and the creak of the bed as he sat down. Hope's voice murmured and he replied. Sleep and the impossibility of Charlotte's being dead were too much for me. There was a small tear in the curtains of the room in which I lay, a new cake of soap must be found for the bathroom, and Alice had run out of hair-ribbons. Charlotte was needed for all these things. My brain began indignantly to hunt for all the other things Charlotte must return to do until I fancied that Charlotte herself was in the room, pulling the rug over my shoulders and saying: "You'll get cold later on. If there's an enigma at all you've squeezed it out of your own silly imagination."

I said: "How absurd. They told me you were dead, but that kind of thing doesn't happen in real life."

The dream that Charlotte was dead began to obsess my understanding, and I whimpered: "At least you had ten years of happiness. No one can hope for more. They should have been mine. Charlotte, I'm sorry. God help me if I hurt you. Say you forgive me. Oh, Charlotte, Charlotte——!"

She turned round with the words: "I'd mend it, but I can't find my work-box. Perhaps Hope's borrowed it."

She began to fade into the darkness of the doorway, and in a last effort to obtain her forgiveness I sat up. I really sat up, and I found Will sitting on the divan. I began to say: "Good heavens, Will, I had nightmare——" when he flung out an arm, seized the front of my shirt and thrust me against the wall.

Words were forced uncontrollably between his teeth. He said: "You killed her. Don't answer me! Her only refuge was to have a baby. This is the man I took in out of charity.

You've *killed* her. You kill whatever you touch. Hadn't you done her enough harm? Say a word and I'll——"

He shook me. I have never experienced such terrifying helplessness. The strength in his fingers was enough to have strangled me. All the time I was fuddled with sleep, not sure whether this, too, was nightmare. I gasped: "Will—Will—you're insane! Let me go."

All the thoughts he had bottled up poured out of him. "Do you suppose I never despaired? In prison they wouldn't let me write. I was made to tear up old clothes. You'd have enjoyed yourself. You like destruction. To one who creates there are forty thousand who destroy. The creative must always suffer and perish. You destroyed Charlotte. The part of Marjorie you touched you killed. You killed your father and your mother. If you speak a word I'll murder you."

His face approached mine out of the darkness. I saw his teeth gleam and felt his breath on my cheek. He was mad, but because he had been mad before, as when he had gone for Snyder, he knew that to hear me protest would excite him beyond control. I wondered how long he had been sitting there, watching me sleeping.

He said: "She didn't know what love was. But I gave her everything in life she wanted. She was my wife, that was all. Charlotte——!"

His grip slowly relaxed. The devil was passing out of him. He sat for a moment or two, a vague outline in the darkness of the room, hands on knees and head bowed. I ventured to ask: "What do you mean, she didn't know what love was?"

He turned his head and spoke with the voice of reason. "I always thought she was hiding something, but there was never anything. She used to rouse the devil in me."

He got up and began to walk round the room. "I don't know what to do, Harry. All my background's gone. What shall I do with Hope and the kids? I shan't be able to work. It's a mess. I was willing to sacrifice tomorrow, but all this means that I shan't be able to get back to my desk until the week-end. I've got to have something to show Jones. I thought of using *Tom Bowling*. What do you think ?"

" Too much of a dirge."

" Hornpipes are played out. Do you remember the air of *The Golden Vanity* ?"

I found that he had left the room. I couldn't believe that his hand had been at my throat five minutes before. He seemed rational enough now for me to pull the rug over myself again. I heard him wandering about the house, going into the children's room again and back into Charlotte's. Some time later he put his head in at the door and said : " I'm going to Marjorie's. She'll be able to suggest something."

But I was already half asleep and didn't hear him go.

2

This time I slept like a laudanum addict, with violent dreams that I forgot the moment I entered the next, endless chasings and fallings imbued with a sense of having lost something necessary to existence. Once I woke and I remembered Charlotte and was glad to fall asleep again, even though the nightmares recommenced.

Finally a noise of footsteps roused me, I flung off the rug and darted into the hall, and came face to face with Marjorie. My brain was still hag-ridden. I said : " Damn those lobster sandwiches."

She had a bundle in her arm. I looked closer and saw that it was Alice, fast asleep with her finger in her mouth. Marjorie said : " Why, Harry, you're dreaming !"

" Where are you off to ?"

" I'm taking all three of them home. Will, too."

I followed her outside, where a car was drawn up at the kerb. An indistinguishable female within, probably Marion, accepted Alice, and we turned to fetch the others. Will passed us, carrying Hope. It was like the plague. I whispered to Marjorie : " I say, did the new baby live ?"

She replied: "There was never any hope for either."

"Women have been having babies since Eve. What are doctors for?"

"Will has no idea why she had it."

She came downstairs carrying Rowley, who was awake and excited by the prospect of staying at Marjorie's. I saw them safely into the car, Will flung a bundle of clothes into the back and they drove off without farewell.

I stood alone by the roadside. A chill small wind stirred the lilac, in which the first sparrow cheeped. I was going into the house when a woman's voice called from an upstairs window: "Is everything all right? Mrs. Holland, I mean."

"She's dead. The baby, too."

The woman caught her breath. "Dear God——!" and she added: "You'll excuse me asking." A window shut.

The incident moved me more than anything that had gone before, and once I was inside the kitchen tears started to my eyes. It was five o'clock. Sleep was out of the question. I made tea for myself and, seeing the mess of our last night's supper, began to clear it up. My zeal quickened. I went through the whole house making beds, wrapping up clothes and tidying rooms. It was penance, for Charlotte was everywhere. Will had lain on her bed, but without turning back the sheet. As always, her house-wife's purse lay behind the bread-board. The work-box I had dreamed of was, in fact, under Hope's bed.

I found myself absent-mindedly making up the stove. To what end? The house was silent. I found a radio station working, and "Don José, the Don I Adore" fell out of the ether, all the way from Helsinki.

Charlotte had been born to be used by others. Smith & Snelson's had put her into a box to count pennies for them. Her father had made her his housekeeper. I had taken her for my pleasure. Will had made her give him children and a background. Had she contained her own wishes and ambitions? I should never know. I should never know, too, how many others went through life merely employed.

The garden filled with sunlight, the trees were hung with smoke, and the birds had given up their first chorus to go about their daily business. The house began to confine me, but I felt that I must stay in case someone telephoned, or Will returned. But nothing happened. About eight I took a deck-chair out to the plum tree, and with the sun on my back fell asleep.

The woman next door, attired in dust-cap and apron, was beating mats outside her back door, and to avoid her I went in through the french windows. I had slept for two hours. The postman had delivered a doctor's bill, and the morning paper declared that a million were homeless and twenty thousand drowned following the bursting of the Hoang-Ho's banks. The news left me unmoved.

I made the round of the house again in preparation for leaving it, taking conscious farewell of each room. The sensation recurred that I had felt in my father's hotel bedroom, of the futility of endeavour and the transience of personality. The dressing-gown that had yesterday been Charlotte's was now something worth three shillings or less. I gathered up a pair of children's shoes and a pinafore and put them with one or two things of Will's, his slippers and hair-brush, on the table in the hall. The house was cold and smelt of yesterday's cooking. I locked all the doors, banged the front door behind me, and stole into the neighbour's garden to pop the latch-key through her letter-box.

Then I departed. Relief began to steal back as the exercise of cycling warmed my limbs. At least the temptation of Charlotte had forever been reft from me. I had learnt that the anguish of temptation dies when temptation dies, whereas the anguish of love persists when love is dead.

I was astonished that the world had not stopped in its march. Crates of lettuces were being unloaded outside a greengrocer's, and a slatternly woman was clouting her child. I called at a snack-bar for breakfast, and overheard a lorry-driver's views on a new Act restricting his hours and mileage.

I wanted to talk to him, but knew nothing about the subject, and was glad to argue with the proprietor about the price of flannel shirts. Why was it that my only contact with four or five men, all fellow creatures, was the price of flannel shirts?

The Stonegrove house awaited me without welcome, newly painted and its gardens trim and productive, but all devoid of personality. I had even banished the smell of boiled fish. When I wondered why I found myself cut off from life, I remembered that this had been my deliberate policy for years. Now the realization filled me with horror. Nobody would care or even discover me if I died. I went through the rooms, as I had gone through the rooms at Will's house, and found nothing of Harry Wilshaw more permanent than his soiled linen. The score I had been arranging was someone else's. I had no wife and, by a strange mischance, no child.

Oh! I thought, it had been a vile remark of Will's, even though he had been out of his mind at the time, that everything I touched I killed! And yet, when I looked round and saw the desert of my past and the friendlessness of my present, I felt that there might be some truth in it.

In my distress I cried out my father's name. I had neglected him so far as to let him die alone, but I knew that he had forgiven me and had come to smile philosophically with me at the doctors quarrelling in his bedroom. Now I needed his protection. I found myself on my knees praying for forgiveness. I was in Marjorie's bedroom at the time, leaning against her bed with my head in my arms. Tears smarted my eyes. I went through my history to discover how I might have behaved differently. No method suggested itself and I was ashamed, because I felt that, had my nature been more charitable, sweeter, or more understanding, I should not have arrived at my present pass.

But if my nature had been more charitable, sweeter, or more understanding, I should not have been Harry Wilshaw but someone else. Will Holland, for instance, would have given up his bed to his mother, but then I was not Will Holland. I was not therefore ultimately responsible for my faults. They were ineradicable stains, like the stain on the floor of Canterbury Cathedral where Beckett's blood had been spilled. Karma ruled supreme.

I rose from my knees feeling refreshed but still mystified, clutching a couple of kirby-grips that I had found under the bed. Somewhere there was a gap in my reasoning. Was it that I had left out the New Testament?

I went downstairs to seat myself at the large table in the dining-room where my scores were laid out, but my brain refused the task. An evil idea had entered it, that Will was returning with his children to live at my wife's house.

At once a battery of arguments was advanced to commend the move. He could not look after the children himself. Of the house's four spare bedrooms he might surely be given the smallest, which was the one he would choose. He had always been a protégé of Mrs. Webster's, and now more than ever, when British-Emmanuels were warring with Coloursounds for possession of him, he needed a sympathetic background.

Despite all these advantages, an emotion stirred within me that I recognized as envy. I lived alone and, especially today, was given to morbid thoughts. I had forfeited all my rights to Marjorie. But presently I got up and began striding angrily about the room. I had long suspected Will of an improper interest in Marjorie. Half a dozen instances flashed through my mind. Will had even suggested that I divorced Marjorie! Was she not my wife? His going there was an outrage on Charlotte's memory.

A knock came at the front door. It was the milkman, totting up with indelible pencil what I owed him for the week. He was in a hurry, but on one pretext or another I kept him talking, about the weather, the state of the road outside the house, and the prospects of his employers giving him an electrically-driven van in place of a horse. At last he tore himself away.

The brief intercourse with the world had given me proportion. Charged with emotion, I sat down at the table again and wrote the following letter:

"My dear Marjorie,

"Charlotte's death has made me realize what a selfish beast I've been. I can see nothing but a wasted life with nothing achieved in it and you, whom you know I love, estranged from me. Yes, it has been my fault. I have locked myself away from you and from everybody——"

I thought then that if my purpose were really to win over a woman, bitter self-reproaches had never in the course of recorded history achieved that end, and I began again.

"Dearest Marjorie.

"I feel that I can only open my heart to you on paper. Meeting you last night, unexpectedly, in Will's house, has brought home to me what I am missing. I have behaved abominably, but you are my wife and I love you. Won't you come back to me? The death of Will's wife has only brought to a head feelings I have had for some time—of loveless years and an empty house. Dearest, what I tell you is true, for have I not cleaned and painted the house, inside and out, in the expectation that you will return? You are too kind-hearted to refuse me. Perhaps you will give me your answer at the funeral! I kiss you.

"Your own
"Harry."

This letter still seemed strained, hard as I had tried to make it artless, so I rewrote it without the "I kiss you", and then posted it.

3

Marjorie did not go the funeral, because she was mothering the three children who, of course, were also absent. Will would therefore have been alone had he not motioned me to leave the half-dozen friends and neighbours who attended, and sit by him in the draughty chapel on the bare, cemetery hillside.

I contained none of the pride I had felt at my father's funeral and none of the resentment I had felt at my mother's, but only desolation. I bore no relationship to Charlotte except that I was the unacknowledged father of her first child, yet I felt that I alone was mourning her. Will bore the proceedings without flinching. I could have sworn that he wasn't even thinking about music. He seemed to me a figure stripped to elementals, like Job.

It was late June, but gusts of wind were blowing and suddenly, while we were assembled at the grave-side, a shower of cold rain fell upon us, pattering on the coffin. As though at a signal, the birds in the elms around us began to sing, a starling, a blackbird, and finally an unseen cuckoo. . . . I have too often found nature reflecting my own joys and angers to disregard its moods, and my despair was made to seek its usual refuge in detachment. Holland, too, looked up and faintly smiled.

From behind the prim group of mourners, turning their black coats and skirts to the blast, a navvy edged forward, yellow clay daubed over corduroys, shirt and arms, and at the proper moment threw down a handful of soil, thereafter withdrawing to wipe his nose on his finger and his finger on his trousers. As we turned away, the parson to conduct another funeral with equal feeling and we to our cars, I thought of the gravedigger waiting for us to disappear before dragging his shovel from under the rhododendrons and hurriedly burying Charlotte, not in a mood of despair or with the barbed jests of a clown in *Hamlet*, but because his tea was growing cold at the lodge.

4

Will spent the night with me. When I suggested it, he agreed willingly, only stopping on the way to phone Mrs. Webster. He said that he would not in any case be able to work that evening. He was anxious to talk, and followed me round the kitchen as I prepared supper. I had bought a couple of mackerel, which I had remembered was a dish he enjoyed when done properly with parsley sauce, and one, moreover, that he would not be likely to have given him on the hill.

I asked after Hope, and was told that she would eat nothing and followed him in silence wherever he went. The thought of the motherless children was one of those human situations from which the mind flinches. Will, too, seemed anxious not to talk about them. He had now definitely parted with Coloursounds on the issue of *King Swing*, and Billy-boy was masking reproaches with philosophic calm.

Every now and then Will would dart in to the front room, and demonstrate on the piano an idea for British-Emmanuels' *Raleigh*. I was touched, for he had always valued my opinion as critic. Could it be possible that in this small way I was of use to mankind, through Will?

We had shied off the subject of Charlotte, but after the meal I said: " Will, that cuckoo——! "

He rose and began to walk round the room. " Wasn't it curious! Just before the passage ' Deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death '. I've remembered something. It's a heathen belief that when such a thing happens——! " He looked at me excitedly, and I wondered what had gripped his imagination. " Wasn't it the Redskins? To them, the cuckoo would be Charlotte's spirit."

He stood gazing through the windows, on which the rain was beating, wordless with the rapture of creation. I replied: " That wasn't the idea I had. There's a poem somewhere." I went over to the bookshelf and hunted among Marjorie's shelves until I found an anthology. " Here you are—Matthew Arnold.

' ——the cuckoo's parting cry
From the wet field, through the vext garden trees,
Come with the volleying rain and tossing breeze.'

That's got it exactly."

He snatched the book from my hand and began to read, walking up and down the room, exclaiming: " Why didn't you tell me before ? " Then he sat down at the piano to try out four or five bars with his right hand. He said : " Don't you see ? That's it." Then he rose, rubbing his hands with the familiar motion of satisfaction.

I went into the kitchen to make coffee. I heard him playing his *canto firmo* with increasing certainty. Presently he came in and said : " I'm writing a song. That's the theme I've been looking for. It's for Marjorie."

I pushed his coffee across to him. " Aren't you a cad ! Making copy out of your own wife's funeral ! "

He glared back, suspecting insult, but without understanding.[1]

I conned in my mind how I was to approach the subject of Marjorie, but because he was busy with his song, gesticulating and murmuring to himself, I was unable to refer to it until bedtime. I had given him the little room despised by my mother. Across the landing I called out : " They're looking after you at Marjorie's, are they ? " Something incoherent came back. I continued : " You'll have to watch your step. Mrs. Webster's always had designs on you."

I thought that that would bring him out. It brought him to my threshold in shirt and suspenders. " What are you driving at ? "

" Didn't she always want to marry you off to Marjorie ? "

" Don't talk like a fool."

I rose. " Seriously, Will."

" I never gave the idea a thought."

Will was incapable of deceit. All my suspicions of him had been wicked, and he became a man to be pitied and warned. I said : " The place is ideal. They know you, they'll look after the children, and they'll foster all the music you've got in you. But you'll find yourself married to Marjorie inside six months."

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[1] I am glad to give in its context the history of this song's origin. I like to disparage it as so much Schubert, with its raindrops drumming on the coffin and its twice repeated cuckoo-cry, but I confess that I never hear it without a prickling of the skin.

I saw by his anger that the idea was new to him. " But—but she's married to you, isn't she? I mean, you're not living with her, although——"

" Haven't you heard the word ' divorce ' mentioned? "

His anger mounted. " Over the phone, when she'd heard that I was staying here, Mrs. Webster asked me to sound you on the subject. I couldn't understand her. These damned women! But it's impossible! I've not the least wish. I like Marjorie. I'm writing songs for her. She's introduced me to people I have to know. In the past she's even lent me money. What shall I do? Women are always thinking in terms of love and marriage. They can't give their minds to anything that matters."

He banged one great fist into another and walked, muttering, out of the room.

Only one more incident connected with his stay is memorable. I went into his room with early-morning cups of tea and drank mine seated on his bed. He was surly, whether because memory of Charlotte was weighing upon him or because he begrudged time lost, I was not to know. A notebook by his bedside told of nocturnal ideas.

Trained by poverty, he had always been careful of his clothes. Every evening he emptied his pockets, and now I saw their contents neatly piled on the dressing-table. On his wallet, among other notes and letters, was the envelope containing my own letter to Marjorie.

I remembered then that she had always foisted difficult correspondence on to others.

5

A week or two later I was given another aspect of Will's activities, at the cinema. I rarely went there. I had taken Nancy to see *Mary, Queen of Scots*, at the Leicester Square

Louvre; and because the good-hearted creature had been saddened by the spectacle of the hapless queen losing her lovers through power politics, we had come out half-way through.

Then, later, having no Charlotte to visit, I dropped into an Edgware picture-house, and saw a three-minute news film of the *Mary, Queen of Scots* première.

The great Solomons, authority on Scots airs, came into view; the Presbyterian leader who had backed the film for religious reasons; visiting stars of both sexes, proving by their asides that rehearsal was necessary to them; a close-up of Rose Maydew, who had played the part of Mary; and there, in the background, slightly out of focus, was Will himself, dressed in a tail-suit and shaking hands with someone whose features didn't matter because they were hidden by Rose Maydew's bosom.

The glimpse lasted eight seconds, but it was enough to show me that Will had arrived.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I

THOUGH I might hope, I had no reply from Marjorie, nor could I have expected one. I became more conscious than ever of my failings. It even crossed my mind to give Marjorie her freedom and marry Nancy, who might, under pressure, have agreed. But then I had nothing to live on, and nowhere to establish the home of which I dreamt. Later, therefore, when Marjorie's embarrassment might have faded, I attended what had become known as " a Webster Sunday ".

Streets and houses now covered the fields through which Will and I had formerly walked, and the railway company had built a new concrete station, but the school playingfields, one of which adjoined the Webster's, were of the old billiard-table smoothness. Age (I was thirty-six) was beginning to hint at the impermanence of life, even of my own, and I marvelled that the school pavilion could remain unchanged while Charlotte had married, born three children and died. Long after I had gone, the police station would stand there, the hospital and the public lavatories, frequented by people unmindful of the ancient truth that flesh is grass.

A big gathering was present. Why not? The sisters had been only faintly interested in Charlotte, and it was now Marjorie's job to make Will forget her, too. Mrs. Webster was sitting under the same buddleia as in years past. Butterflies had always been hypnotized by it, and the wind still tossed them into the air like scraps of paper. Marjorie had her arm through Will's as they walked up and down the lawn in conversation with Queenie Scott and a B.B.C. producer. Queenie's morals had so far not allowed of her broadcasting. It was obviously inopportune for me to join them, and presently they went inside.

Billy-boy was not present. Will's two youngest, Alice and Rowley, were happily playing in the large nursery upstairs, and only Hope, crouched at Mrs. Webster's feet, raised her large brown eyes from a book to acknowledge me before dropping them again. Otherwise not a soul paid any attention to me, except that Marjorie, when she re-emerged to supervise tea, asked me to bring out a trayful of drinks. I was never able to catch her alone, and, because only misery awaited me at home, I refused to depart without speaking to her.

Disconsolately I wandered indoors and seated myself at the upright in Dr. Webster's former study, chiefly because a study of Scarlatti lay open upon it. Softly I began to play, making error after error. Someone else was in the room, a stranger seated in an arm-chair, reading the *Bystander*. Suddenly there was a rush of footsteps and Agnes scrambled onto the stool beside me.

"That's not the way."

Forthwith she played it straight through. She was not now attired as a sultana, but simply, in black, with her abundant fair hair brushed severely back from the temples and tied with a small bow at the nape. " See ? "

I saw.

" Nobody'll play duets with me." She threw open a book of Haydn. " I'll take the treble."

We began to play duets. The man in the arm-chair was joined by a woman and vaguely I overheard their conversation.

" Splendid. How did you pull it off ? "

" My aunt knows his mother awfully well. Matter of fact, they were at school together in Oxfordshire or somewhere. It's worth eight-fifty a year, basic."

Agnes interrupted : " You're a bar behind."

" No. You're a bar in front."

" Start again from D."

We recommenced. The man was saying : " Matter of fact, I'm straight out of the Indian Army. Rather a change—assistant to a supervisor of something or other in Overseas Broadcasts. They told me to come here because——" Mumble, mumble.

Agnes stopped and turned to me. " I don't think you're really trying."

I replied : " No, I'm not. Let's try the grand, next door."

In a second she had darted from the room, taking the score with her. I rushed after her. With the young, all time is the present. Now we managed the duet nicely, and went on to others. I forgot the party, Marjorie and the imminence of death. The flowering of this new character fascinated me. She was persistent, elusive, absorbed in music, and very much the schoolgirl. She told me that she had composed a ballad, played hockey and hoped next year both to become a pref. and to get her matric.

Finally she threw up her hands and said : " Gosh, I'm hungry." We found biscuits and a bar of stale chocolate in the sideboard. She put her head out of the door and quickly withdrew it. "They'll be here for ages yet. I hate them—always talking about themselves! Marjorie'll be looking for me. She's not very nice to me." She looked at me frankly. "I don't care whether you're her husband or not, but she's perfectly beastly to you."

"In this house I've got a reputation for being a bit of a beast myself."

"Oh, no, you're all right. You married Marjorie, that's all."

"Everybody thinks that Uncle Will ought to have married her instead."

She replied mischievously: "That doesn't go for Uncle Will himself!" She felt that she had gone too far, and switched the subject. "Another thing about Marjorie—I'm the only one, apart from Hope, whom Uncle Will allows in his room while he's working. Marjorie's jealous. She tells me not to worry him. Uncle Will sticks up for me. I've even helped him."

"Nobody else in his whole life has dared to stay with Uncle Will while he's working. I wonder he doesn't crucify you."

She laughed. Some aspects of her were very feminine. "He says that he'd have strangled you years ago if he were not dependent upon your judgment."

"What's that?"

She repeated her words. I could have hugged her. Will, dependent upon me? It was news of the first order. I felt that there might be hope for me. Agnes herself accorded me respect because of it. She said: "I think music's everything, don't you? I mean——" She turned swiftly to the piano and began to play a simple melody made striking by a change of key in the last bar. Smoothing her skirts, she asked: "Don't you think it's fine?"

"It sounds like Purcell, or one of the madrigalists—someone working inside self-imposed limits."

The foolish girl clapped her hands, rushed to my side and kissed my fingers. I was dumbfounded and charmed. She cried: " No wonder Uncle Will won't strangle you! You're a darling. I composed it myself—I—I!" and she thumped her chest.

" Does anybody know?"

" Good Lord, not a soul. You mustn't breathe a word. I've done lots. Not as good as that, though. Shall I tell you something? I think Uncle Will's too colourful—he let's himself go too much."

I could not begin to explain to the child. " If there's one thing your Uncle Will is noted for, it is austerity and self-discipline."

She pouted. " All the same——" But at that moment the door opened and Marjorie appeared. She took no notice of me and said authoritatively: " Your homework's not done," and held the door open for Agnes to leave. No doubt Marjorie had the household under her thumb. The child bobbed me a curtsy and went. I began to say: " Marjorie——!" but the door shut.

For five minutes I played Scarlatti and then I, too, left the room.

2

But for Agnes's confidence I would have left for home, but now my heart glowed with gratitude to Will for thinking well of me. I knew roughly where his room must be, but I had blundered into two rooms filled with lumber and a third that was probably Hope's before I found him, in a large, richly furnished studio overlooking the playing fields.

Marjorie's influence was evident. He who enjoyed simplicity now sat at an inlaid bureau with a copper inkstand big enough to brew tea in, and his scores were laid out on an antique refectory table and weighted down with soap-stone chessmen. His bed was simple enough, but the only thing I recognized was the green chest of his Harlesden days.

As I put my head in at the door I asked: "*Vie de Bohème?*"

He shook his head. "People don't understand that writers prefer garrets because they are easy to keep warm. In winter this place is a barn."

He was obviously resigned to not working, and I went in. "I can't help deprecating your break with Coloursounds. Billy-boy hasn't been near me for a month. I've run out of cash."

He put his hand into his breast pocket and brought out five Bank of England notes for £5 each. "Take them. They're no use to me," and by way of afterthought: "How Charlotte would have loved to spread them about!"

I seated myself on the green chest. "Is Marjorie being difficult?"

"Marjorie's an absolute angel. Nothing's too much trouble. Look at this room."

"You can't kid me."

He swung round. "I can't go and live in an hotel, can I! There'd be nowhere to work. Besides, Hope wouldn't leave me. I must stay here."

"Why do you let Hope and Agnes stay in the room while you're working?"

His shoulders stiffened, but he made no reply, until, breathing heavily, he said: "Listen, Harry, why don't you come to live here? I'd fix it with Mrs. Webster on some pretext or other. You'd be near Marjorie, and lead whatever life of idleness appeals to you. I'd even keep you in funds."

I shook my head. "I'd just love Marjorie back, but not here. I want my own house." I, too, became earnest. "Do you realize that I'm growing old, with nothing to show for it? I'd even thought of letting her divorce me——"

Another morsel of his self-control went. He swung round. "Not seriously! You've known me a long time now. Don't do that!"

"But why not?" He bit his lips. "You may as well confess, Will, that you're scared stiff."

He mumbled. "I daresay I am."

"But why? I don't see it. If she were free, everything would be in your favour. You're the rising composer; she's got the influence and the money. She loves you and, I don't doubt, looks upon your ready-made family as an advantage. Tell me what your objection is."

He gazed at me, obviously longing to overcome his native reserve, and said at last: "I certainly can't tell anyone else. People talk of marrying as they talk of going to the pictures. Books, films, newspapers—all leave off at the words 'a marriage has been arranged'." He was suffering acute embarrassment and whispered: "Cusbeck was a case in point. Nobody explains how——"

There he stuck. I whispered back: "You mean that marriage implies stepping into the same bed!"

"Yes, but Marjorie——" He rallied the courage to begin again, and say rapidly: "However much I like Marjorie, I shall never be able to bring myself to the point of stepping into the same bed with her. That's my objection."

I could have shaken his hand. "Now you know why our marriage was a failure!"

"So that was it!"

We were as excited as two white men in the jungle who discover that they are wearing the same school-tie. I replied: "I want her back, but I still have to think my way round that difficulty."

Had the subject not been so near my heart I might have laughed. In any case the conversation dropped because Marjorie herself came in, carrying a glass of Russian tea in a silver holder. She ignored me as Ethel might have ignored me and said, like Ethel: "He's not bothering you, is he, Will?"

Will replied: "Thanks. You are much too good. Harry's bothered me since I was twenty, and it's too late to stop him."

I said: "I don't know whether Will wants me to say it, but he has just suggested that I ask your mother if I might come and live here."

Marjorie seated herself on the divan, and her cheeks slowly crimsoned. "Did you really, Will? But—but why?"

"He's a rogue, but his ear's infallible. Also he's your husband."

At that moment Marjorie's pose, her brilliant cheeks and pouting mouth made her seem all the more desirable. I would not then have restrained her from insisting on her conjugal rights. I leaned over her and kissed her forehead. A man may sometimes safely kiss his wife before a witness when he would not dare to do so in private.

She averted her face, threw me a scowl and rose to put her arm round Will, who had seated himself at his desk again. "Will, dear, the idea's absurd. Don't you think you've done enough for today? Drink your tea and come downstairs again."

Her voice went on in soothing murmurs. Suddenly, as in a vision, I saw the fate prepared for me. Just as for two years I had wooed Charlotte and watched her lavish herself upon Will, so now I must woo Marjorie. There were differences. Charlotte's love for Will had been self-effacing, whilst Marjorie's was demonstrative. Will had hidden his love for Charlotte, and now he hid aversion for Marjorie. The central situation was the same.

Long ago I had juggled with Charlotte and Marjorie as one juggles with a couple of oranges. I remembered that at the time I had doubted whether human beings, and women at that, were intended to be juggled with like oranges.

Meanwhile Will had risen with flushed cheeks, and exclaimed: "I can't do another stroke," and walked out of the room with his Russian tea.

Marjorie turned to me. "There you are. That's what comes of disturbing him. You really will have to be more considerate, Harry."

In her wrath she looked magnificent. The words poured from my lips that had been mounting for weeks. "Marjorie, I don't want to come and live here. I want you to come and live with me. Did you get my letter?" She retreated as I approached. My suit was hopeless, but I continued: "It was never your money I wanted. It's you. Forgive me, but I love you."

"If you love me, you'd let me divorce you." It was her final word.

Critical conversations do not end according to theatrical convention with a banged door, but with a shuffling on the threshold and stifled embarrassment. So now I had the misfortune to step on Marjorie's toe before we were finally clear of one another. It was the last indignity.

I continued to pay court to Marjorie, having her slight me in every way open to feminine scorn and ingenuity, and watching her hedge Will round with loving care, until well into the following year.

3

In time Agnes gained her matric., but she was not allowed to become a pref. because Marjorie sent her to Lausanne. I had always thought that the fashion for remitting English girls to finishing schools abroad had been reversed in favour of Europe's remitting its girlhood to finishing schools in England, but it was not a subject on which I was an authority. The move did, however, decisively take her out of Will's room, and may have been precipitated by Marjorie's discovery that Agnes was influencing Will's work. Her inventiveness never failed him, and her childlike regard for austerity gave him an ideal.

Perhaps by coincidence Hope was also sent away, to a boarding school in Hertfordshire, but, after six weeks spent weeping in lavatories, she ran away. Thereafter Will kept her at home. I may have influenced his decision. I told him that, Marjorie or no Marjorie, Hope ought to be allowed to stay with him, and that as her father I had the right to make such a recommendation. She was sent to a small school in Roxeth, made cooking her favourite subject and gardening her hobby, and slept in the room next to Will's. She was a silent and obscure child, born to be victimized. Although I cared for her out of regard for Charlotte's memory, I never noticed that our mutual affection deepened as, according to moral and canon law, it should.

On the other hand, Marjorie's antipathy to me increased so much that I only visited the house on Will's invitation. When anyone else might have objected to visiting his own wife at the request of another man, I was glad to do so. I had no hope of winning her, but waited for the inevitable break when Marjorie's devotion to Will drove him away. She ordered his diet, directed him when to work and where to take his pleasure, arranged his appointments, and walled him up for the night when she thought it necessary for him to sleep.

The vigour of his creative spirit withstood even Marjorie. He finished *Raleigh*, and signed a contract to write the score for *Wooden Walls*. Further, an unexpected distinction came his way when a violin concerto that he had written in Charlotte's day was awarded a Gold Medal and Diploma at the Pesth Quinquennial Festival. The fact that he was British had told against him, but as soon as the story of Ygor Ferenczi got about, Russia, Poland and Czecho-Slovakia each claimed him as a national, detecting in his work unmistakable traces of their own folk music.

It was afterwards held against Will that he had not persisted in his efforts to have the work first broadcast in this country. Perhaps some blame attached to him. He had sent in the MS. to the B.B.C., and over a period of eight months had kept three appointments with different ladies with a view to having it arranged and copied, but nothing came of them. Eventually the MS. was returned to him (truth being stranger than fiction) by the Curator's Office at Kew Gardens.

However, the B.B.C. amply forgave him by relaying from Hungary the first performance of his concerto, although unfortunately it ran into a half-hour allotted to a well-known

Lancashire comedian, on which account the final movement was cut short.

He seemed to me like Daedalus poised for flight. It was all the greater pity that his mind should not have been free from anxiety. All his life, perhaps unconsciously, he had barricaded himself against interference. I now warned him repeatedly that if he valued his liberty he must leave Harrow, but, chiefly because of Hope, he never did. The most I could do by way of friendship was to forswear Nancy's company, so that Marjorie should not stumble upon grounds for divorcing me and be free to marry him.

The phase ended not, as I had hoped, with Will's breaking out of his prison, but with Marjorie paying me a visit. This had not happened since her departure a decade before.

About eleven o'clock one morning I heard a car door slam, and glanced out of the window to see Marjorie coming up the garden path followed by someone I didn't recognize, a man in bowler hat and patent-leather shoes. She greeted me at the door effusively, shook my hand and walked inside, saying: "How nice the house is looking, Harry! I must say that you're a model tenant." She sniffed. "New paint! Mmmmm. Let me introduce you to my solicitor, Mr. Bodikins. Mr. Bodikins, this is my husband."

I shook Mr. Bodikins's hand. At mention of the word "solicitor" my knees had turned to water.

Marjorie went on, evidently well rehearsed. "I must have a talk with you, Harry. Shall we go into the garden? Mr. Bodikins can go in there."

We left Mr. Bodikins in my music-room, and sauntered out of the french windows. Marjorie said: "Delightful! I've never seen it so spruce. All those raspberries! I could throw a party here, couldn't I! Are you sure that you don't want me to divorce you, Harry?"

I replied sadly: "Ah, divorce! I wish you wouldn't talk about it. I've told you so many times that I keep this house as nice as it is in the hope that you will come and live here.

After all, it's your house. I know that for some time I haven't had the money to pay the rent, but I hoped that you were going to come back to it. . . ."

She took my arm. I daresay the doctor's wife thought that she was witnessing a reconciliation. Marjorie said: "Yes, I did think of coming back to it. I want it for myself." She became even more effusive. "I'm sure you will understand, Harry. I'm going to marry Will. It's for his own good. I can do so much more for him, married to him. Mother wants it, Hope and the two children want it, we all want it. I'm sure that you wouldn't willingly stand in Will's way." She squeezed my hand. "There's an angel."

"Does Will know that he's going to marry you?"

"What a ridiculous question! Of course he does. He's asked me, hasn't he?"

"I don't know. Has he?"

"Of course he has. That is to say, he's very shy, and the circumstances are a bit unusual. I mean, he couldn't very well ask me outright, he could only suggest it."

I considered. There was one factor I could not mention to Marjorie. I was broke so far as to owe money to tradesmen. If I let her divorce me I became no one, and penniless and homeless to boot. Irrationally, having painted every bit of woodwork in the Stonegrove house, I looked upon it as my own. There was not an artichoke in the garden that did not owe its life to me. The house and grounds would fall into mourning and decay without me. Besides this, I was curious about Will. I did not believe that he had suggested marrying Marjorie. This idea came out first.

I said: "I'd like to see Will about it first."

She took a firmer grip on my hand. "Harry, I don't want to quarrel with you, but both Mother and I think that you're an upsetting influence upon Will. . . ."

She went on to explain, but her words passed through my head. I was angry, and restrained my anger so as to think, and failed to think because memory of the solicitor sitting in the music-room paralysed thought. Finally I spluttered with laughter. "Poor Will!"

Marjorie released my hand in indignation. "What do you mean?"

"You're very much taking charge of him, aren't you?"

"Harry, if that isn't the vilest thing——! I'm doing everything for him. Now he wants to marry me. Are you going to let me have the divorce?"

I replied: "I owe it to Will not to give it to you."

She looked at me uncertainly. "Harry, sometimes I think you're a lunatic. What do you mean?"

"Simply that Will is a creative artist. You are slowly suffocating him. If I give you grounds for divorce, you will completely suffocate him. Therefore I shall not give you the divorce."

It was the nearest I ever got to quarrelling with her. She restrained her emotions with difficulty, grasped my hand and dragged me into the house, exclaiming: "You must say that in front of Mr. Bodikins."

Mr. Bodikins rose as we entered. He was not at ease. I rather took to him, apart from his being a solicitor. I gathered that he had an unpleasant task of some sort to perform, and a valuable client to appease. He had my sympathy, for I had often tried to appease the same client.

Marjorie said: "Mr. Bodikins, my husband refuses to let me divorce him."

The solicitor coughed. "You didn't mention that it was a question of divorce on which you needed my advice, Mrs. Wilshaw. I gathered that you were more concerned with the restitution of this property."

Marjorie replied: "The two things go together. He won't let me divorce him, therefore I want the house back."

Mr. Bodikins shook his head and turned to me. "In the past few years, Mrs. Wilshaw has often spoken to me about divorce. This is indubitably her house, and the furniture is hers, too. According to what your wife tells me you haven't lived together for well over eight years. Sometimes you have paid your rent, and sometimes you haven't. Latterly you haven't." He smiled quizzically. "The law is, you know—and I am here as a lawyer and not, to my regret, as a mender of homes—that she is entitled to possession of the house. May I ask if you are willing to give it to her?"

I replied: "I don't want to in the least."

Mr. Bodikins turned to Marjorie. "Are you going to insist, Mrs. Wilshaw?"

Marjorie asked me: "Are you going to give me my divorce, Harry, or not?"

I shook my head and said: "No," and turned to Mr. Bodikins. "I mean *no*, Mr. Bodikins. I don't want divorce because I am in love with my wife and want her to come back to me."

Mr. Bodikins sniffed. I imagined that to him love, marriage and divorce represented so many labels on boxes of known contents and quantities. To bring reality home to him, I said: "Do you appreciate what divorce means? I must sleep in a strange bed with a woman I have not the least interest in. How would you like to do it, eh?"

Mr. Bodikins coughed. "The question does not arise. Moreover——"

I interrupted: "Honestly, I don't like the idea. Marjorie is my wife and you're a solicitor, so I can confide in both of you that I have rarely relished sleeping with anyone I'm not in love with. Ask Marjorie. She'll tell you." The solicitor coughed again. He was not enjoying himself. I continued: "It's a fallacy to believe that a man's mind is privately concerned with nothing but a woman's body. Certain Swiss and Viennese doctors have made a philosophy out of it, international celebrity and a handsome profit. A man's mind is mostly blank. Apathy is the world's greatest force, not sex."

Mr. Bodikins said: "I fail to see——"

"But it *does* concern the present issue. You are my wife's solicitor and paid to be on her side. But surely as a solicitor you would not deliberately urge me into adultery? Would your services extend so far as to find someone with whom I may sleep, satisfactory to Divorce and Probate?"

Mr. Bodikins said: "My dear sir——!" and Marjorie said: "Harry, you're talking rubbish. When do you think I can take over the house?"

I replied: "You know, Marjorie, you can't absolutely forbid my speaking to Will first, can you!"

Her eyes flashed with wicked joy as she replied: "I never suggested I should. But you'll find it difficult. He's in Hungary."

The whole of the plot was now clear to me. Not that understanding benefited me, for I was powerless. The threat of dispossession was so much blackmail in case I refused divorce. The question of whether Will had already asked her to marry him, or only made the suggestion, was academic, for here was a solicitor to enforce her will.

I looked at Marjorie. This, I thought, was the girl who had once declared that she could spend the rest of her days flashing in and out of Finchley Road Station with me. Progress of time had made her middle-aged and vindictive. I no longer saw her bubble of a mouth as pretty, but as a symptom of implacable hatred. Was it age that had turned her thus, or the maturing of sex? I perceived that neither was to blame. I was. She was my own punishment, the creation of my own neglect, the logical instrument of fate.

A voice whispered in my heart: "Harry, you're in the cart." I turned to Mr. Bodikins and said: "Really, Mr. Bodikins, are you going to lend your reputation to a woman's vengeance?"

The solicitor retreated into formality. "Nobody regrets these differences more than I do, Mr. Wilshaw. Strictly, they do not concern me. Would you please answer my question:

are you prepared to give possession of the house to your wife, and, if so, when ?"

I answered : "You professional men are always so specific. Specifically then, no. I propose to stay in the house."

This was the end. Mr. Bodikins turned to get his hat, and Marjorie snapped her handbag to and walked out of the room. I shook hands with Mr. Bodikins, but I was cross enough not to want to kiss Marjorie, nor so much as see her again. She was more dead to me than Charlotte, and the prospect of living with her had, *ipso facto*, ceased to be a temptation.

4

The mills of the law began slowly to grind two days later when I received a month's notice to quit. I could do nothing by way of protest, and therefore did nothing. Shortly after the month's notice had expired a summons was served on me—I was sitting in the garden at the time, and it was the same inoffensive bailiff—requiring me to appear in court three weeks later and show cause why possession of the house should not be given to its owner. I did not appear in court because I could not show cause.

Three days after the date of hearing I received a notice saying that an order had been made against me and that I must give up possession, failing which the judgment would be enforced.

On the eighth day after this I opened the door to three men—a bailiff, Marjorie's representative in the person of a clerk from White, Bodikins & Veitch, and a locksmith. I stepped aside and they entered, thus taking possession. I collected a few personal belongings ; the locksmith fitted a new Yale lock in the front door, and the bailiff banged the door behind him. The clerk asked me where letters might be forwarded, and I gave him the address of my nearest relative, viz., my wife. Not a hasty or improper word passed between us throughout the proceedings. They stepped into a car and drove off, leaving me with a choice of two people to whom I might apply for shelter, namely, Uncle Crawshay and Nancy.

When I had knocked at Nancy's door and was answered by an old lady who mistook me for the rent man, I thought that I had reached the nadir of my fortunes. But I was wrong. It was the seven weeks I spent with Nancy, when I had found her, that were the worst.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I

I HAD LITTLE difficulty in tracing Nancy, because the caretaker had received other such enquiries and was able to direct me to an address in Cork Street, Mayfair. This seemed to me the highest peak of endeavour even to one of Nancy's ambition, and when she opened the door to me I was not mistaken in the sumptuousness she had chosen for herself.

Evidently she had been expecting someone. Her hair was brushed up in the new Edwardian style, and she was attired in flowing robes of silk through which I caught naughty glimpses of pink skin. Indeed, she had modelled herself and her surroundings so efficiently on the Hollywood pattern that it was a surprise to hear her still employing a crisp Welsh dialect.

On seeing me, she stepped back, then impulsively drew me inside and exclaimed: "Harry, it is you! And these eight months I have been thinking it was reconciled with your wife you were, or something horrid," and she kissed me.

I said: "You mustn't kiss me, Nancy. You must tell me to go. My wife's thrown me out of my house and I haven't a bean in the world."

She replied: "Well, then, it is a shame and we will talk about it, but now you must go into the kitchen, for it is Roddie Bexhill coming any minute now, and he a lord."

I went into the kitchen as the bell rang, and remained there for two hours. It was an earnest of what I was to experience. The flatlet comprised only the kitchen, which fortunately was roomy, a lounge and a communicating bedroom. Obviously a bad impression would have been created in Nancy's clientele, more fastidious in these new surroundings, to have a male voice answer the telephone or to find a necktie behind a cushion.

When released, I found that the rooms were furnished to avoid bad impressions, with filmy curtains in pink muslin, pink carpets and even a pink ceiling. Someone must have advised her, for nothing was out of character except an ormolu angel swinging from the chandelier, that she had taken in lieu of a bad debt.

Not a trace of the late Roddie Bexhill remained, except that Nancy was absent-mindedly patting her hair. With satin mules on her feet and her bosom opening with the tints of a tea-rose, she could never be imagined as taking refuge from the rain in the doorway of a shuttered fish-shop in the Edgware Road.

She sank into a deep divan and patted the seat beside her. "Come and tell me, Harry." It was the professional touch, and expertize of any sort is to be admired. I went across and told her. I said that I had fallen in love with my own wife and been repulsed by her and finally ejected. She made sympathetic murmurs that dripped with honey. At last she said: "You must stay here."

"But it won't do. Someone else will be calling."

She flicked open an engagement pad on the bookshelf behind us (the furnishing scheme provided for books, if appropriately bound) and murmured: "There will only be a gentleman from the Home Office this evening, and then there is nobody for a few days, except that I have a man from the

Ministry of Health who likes to telephone me on Mondays, before going home."

"But, Nancy, I can't possibly be of any use to you. I've nowhere to go, no money, no relations to speak of."

She replied: "Do not concern yourself, Harry boy. You are a *good* soul, and what I always say is, the good aren't allowed to suffer for very long. Let me put this in your pocket."

She withdrew a roll of notes from her bosom, peeled off one for ten shillings and handed it to me. Roddie Bexhill could not have provided it more obviously had he been there in person to present it. I accepted it without argument and kissed her. "You're a dear."

She rose. "Let us see what is in the ice-bax." An American friend had taught her the word "ice-bax". She could never be made to learn that the thing was a refrigerator. In it we found chippolata sausages, eggs, lettuce, and peaches and cream. The Home Office man came and went, and later the Ministry of Health man telephoned, but after twenty minutes' conversation said that he must go home as his wife was having a bridge party. The evening was otherwise undisturbed. We had a genuine affection for one another. Nancy said that I was the last of her original friends, and that I had brought her luck. Her conversation palled after twenty minutes, although I never quite lost the fascination of listening to her sing-song voice.

About half-past eleven we were fast asleep, when the door-bell rang, and I was forced to scramble out of bed and retire to the kitchen. In anticipation of some such accident, Nancy had made me take off my things there, a practice I continued to follow during the rest of my stay. I gathered that her caller was the Health Ministry man, who had been able to snatch an hour from his wife on the pretext of seeing someone home. He necessarily left early, but on other occasions I was forced to spend the night in the kitchen, until five or six in the morning. I was consoled by the reflection that every pursuit has its drawbacks, but after some days I took to laying a thick sheep-skin rug beside the kitchen-stove and making a permanent couch upon it. I didn't doubt that Eros must many times have longed for a simple night's rest without interruption, before the occasion when Psyche put him to flight with hot oil.

The arrangement must have inconvenienced Nancy, too, but she never complained. Having passed out of Mr. Issuri's grasp, she was now growing tired of the uncertainty of her life and was reaching out to the last heights of harlotry. After living more closely with her, I became convinced that she would attain them. With the long attention paid to them, her face and figure had bloomed to perfection, although I foresaw that in the late thirties she would become dumpy. The contours of her waist, for instance, as they melted into the hips, had to be seen to be believed.

More than this, the mere instrument of her trade, she knew the exact point at which feminine wilfulness ceases to please, and her ingenuousness, beneath which lay the shrewd economy of the Welsh, sprang artlessly from an untainted mind. One knew that she would never descend to the thefts and blackmails which corrupt her profession. An integrity like hers was necessary to the Civil Service, in which she found most of her friends. Her apartment was spotless and her laundry bill prodigious. The only limitation I ever found in her was the failure to recognize more than one motive in masculine behaviour, but even this was an advantage, for it made one's dealings with her simpler.

I remember once chaffing her, for instance, on the edition of *Waverley* she had bought. Someone had told her that nobody lent dignity to a house like Walter Scott, unless it was Ruskin, and she had gone next day to Hatchards', which had been recommended to her as the kind of shop where one buys these things, and acquired an edition of each. Ruskin had proved too dull a binding and was lodged in a trunk until, a volume being remitted every birthday and Christmas to a married sister on a Welsh hillside, none of him remained.

Scott was permanently on show. She neither defended nor apologized for her position in society, but once, on a wet afternoon, when we had exhausted all other topics, she tapped Scott with a mauve finger-nail and said : " People can talk, but if it is pleasure they will be asking for I have given it more than this man, yes, twenty times over."

I replied : " You must remember that he's been going for a hundred years, and has settled down for two or three hundred more."

Her retort showed her simplicity of mind. " Perhaps he was a very good writer. I am not one to say he wasn't. But, don't you see, he was a man and that was all he could do, write books."

// Competition, ever the bugbear of her kind, had ceased to worry her. She was above competition. To sneer was not in her nature, but she came very near it with her description of the girl in the flat below, who had developed a new technique. Arrayed in a floppy straw hat and a distinctive creation of Fenwick's, this girl donned smoked glasses and took taxi-rides in the Bond Street area. When she saw a likely buyer she would attract his attention with a furious tapping on the window and cause the cab to stop a hundred yards farther on. Then when the male had caught up with her she would raise the smoked glasses and murmur : " I'm so sorry. I thought you were Bertie."

Her favourite hours were summer evenings, but three o'clock near Christmas was also a peak period.

Nancy was above tricks of this sort and, in fact, of any sort. She was consciously grooming herself to qualify for the next, and possibly the final degree, which entailed finding a man of wealth to whom, in her fashion, she could exclusively devote herself. Someone had given her the word " protector ", and it was constantly on her lips. " With a protector I shall know where I am." " I would not be fetched from my sleep at godless hours, look you, by a protector." To her the word had come to mean marriage without the drudgery, a selfless and interesting career passing into a twilight of retirement.

The extraordinary thing was that, for some reason, she identified me with this " protector ". It was why she gave me shelter. She was fond of me and I of her. I was at odds with my wife, and must necessarily need a mistress. When I protested that all this was true, but that I was penniless, she replied : " You can tell me that now, Harry boy, but is it not true that all the time I have known you you have lived with the rich and visited them in their houses ? Money is a funny thing the way it comes to those who live near it." I shrugged my shoulders. Her conviction was such that I almost began to believe it.

Meanwhile I was often in a state of despair, seeing no way out of my predicament. I had always been averse to asking for work, but I made a journey to Coloursounds to see Billy-boy. He could do nothing for me. My work was as competent as that of anyone he knew, my execution fast and my rate of payment low, but I was outside the relative union. Will could insist on my arranging his short score before it went to the studios, but a score could not be given to me by them. The film trade, he said, was as stiff with unions as the arteries of an octogenarian with sclerosis.

On the principle that I should find nothing if I stayed indoors, I often walked abroad, making my exit by the back way, between dustbins. On one such occasion I met Hymie Wolfe, my father's old friend. He had not forgotten his old promise to give me help if I needed it, and dined me at the Harringay Sports Arena. He told me that his wife had died and that he had not seen Molly for years. On his advice I placed what shillings I possessed on a double, and came away with six pound notes.

Another outcome of my meeting him was that I had an interview with a minor dance-band leader who wanted someone to play an electric guitar. The wages were high and my situation critical, but I could not force myself to the point of a firm acceptance, if only because it meant playing "Don José, the Don I Adore" four times every evening far into the future, and the offer was left open.

On my way back from this interview I saw Marjorie. I was near Marble Arch at the time; she and Hope were on the Park Lane side of Oxford Street, and I on the other. She waved frantically and made Hope wave, too. I had decided that the last thing I willingly did would be to give her grounds for divorce, and I walked into the Corner House, round to the other exit and leaped onto a bus moving down Oxford Street.

I do not remember any other incident that relieved the gloom of those few weeks. Sometimes I went shopping with Nancy, and by her chafferings with the barrow-boys of Brewer Street was reminded of her Welsh descent. The Prudential man called on the second Thursday of every month. Sometimes, with a clear day before her, she would take me to a suburban cinema, the prices at West End cinemas being three times higher.

It was a narrow and unexciting round.

2

I was lifted out of it, and indeed brought to a new phase in my career, by a visit from Will. He never divulged precisely how he discovered my address. I had once told Charlotte about Nancy, and on another occasion, to satisfy her feminine curiosity, had given her sufficient information about Nancy's Maida Vale home to allow anyone knowledgeable enough to locate it. Charlotte must infallibly have conveyed all I told her to Will.

It was a sufficient commentary on Will's fear of Marjorie that, all the while she was longing to obtain evidence to divorce me, he had known where it was to be procured and said nothing.

A ring came at the apartment door, and in the usual way I made for the kitchen. On these occasions I was never above a little jealousy, seeing Nancy fluffing cushions and smoothing her eyebrows, and the idea had again crossed my mind that with her Welsh economy she might, with advantage, have made me a wife. Her obsession with the idea of a protector, however, precluded the suggestion, apart from my pennilessness.

When she had answered the door I heard her voice rise a little shrilly. Misunderstanding sometimes happened, as for instance when the florist's manager, having no errand-boy at the time, dropped the weekly order upon her in person. This time the male voice was insistent. The tiny lobby lay on the other side of the kitchen wall, and the cultured voice led me to suspect that the caller was Will. Then I opened the door and saw him. I also saw that Nancy was put out—such a contretemps, in which a visitor had no special desire to see her, rarely failed to displease her. I, too, was embarrassed, but felt more comfortable when I had put on shoes and jacket.

Nancy said: " This man is for you, Harry. I have told him I do not know you. It is not my fault if he is a solicitor."

Will and I shook hands, and I made him shake Nancy's, too. I told her: " This is my closest friend and you must be nice to him." To Will I said: " I have known Nancy for a year or two. Not another soul would take me in."

Will bowed. I could see that she had tried to size him up, and was both puzzled and attracted by him. She murmured laughingly: " Oh, Harry knew me when I was practically on the streets." She sat down, with Will beside her.

He said to me: " I had a job finding you. Why did you clear off like that? "

" What else was there for me to do? " We stared at one another in silence, until I said slowly: " Don't tell me Marjorie didn't own up! I was thrown out of Stonegrove—evicted."

I have rarely seen Will show surprise. He grasped the arm of the settee, his face grew red and he rose slowly to his feet.

"Harry!" I nodded my head. He said: "She told me you'd packed up and gone of your own accord."

"I wouldn't give her the divorce. It was blackmail." So many reflections were forced upon him that he was silent. I asked: "Is it true that you suggested marrying her, once I was out of the way?"

He made a gesture of abhorrence and said: "No." After a little he went on: "I take back all I ever said about you, Harry. You did it for my sake."

"I didn't. If I had given her the divorce, she'd have turned me out just the same. One cannot argue with the forces of nature."

He even laughed. Unused to neglect, Nancy said: "Harry, will this be good or bad?"

I replied: "Ask Will. My wife wants to marry him. If she finds out about you, she will succeed."

Nancy asked: "Does it mean I will perhaps be having to go to court and see my name in the papers?"

"If the worst comes to the worst."

She rose, much upset. "Then it is bad. You know my friends will not like my name being in the papers. They will think that the next step is having their name in the papers, and you know they will murder rather than let such an odious thing happen."

We all laughed, and Nancy said that she would make tea. While she was in the kitchen, Will said: "What a rascal you are!"

I replied: "She's got her eye on you. D'you mind laying off?"

We laughed again. I was very happy to see him. I asked him how the Continent was taking his music, and he replied that a Leipzig firm had offered to publish everything he wrote, provided he used the name of Ferenczi, and that a Balkan king had made him a Knight of Minos, as a bribe to becoming one of his subjects.

Nancy reappeared with a tea-tray and we hastened to clear a table for her. She said prettily: "I am finding it funny to have two gentlemen wait upon me. Look you, I have only two whole cups and saucers. The other is odd."

I tried to monopolize Nancy, but she had to explain to Will how we had lived, and Will had to explain to her how Marjorie had come to rule his life. I felt that I just couldn't bear to retire discreetly to the kitchen leaving them alone, however much I liked both of them.

Fortunately the suggestion was not made. Will suddenly exclaimed: "Good lord, Harry, I had forgotten my purpose in ferreting you out!" He put his hand in his pocket and brought out a couple of letters. "Some solicitors are after you. Don't be alarmed. They aren't your wife's. When they didn't get a reply they wrote to Marjorie asking for your whereabouts. Marjorie said that she caught sight of you once, but that you disappeared."

I opened the letters with an anxious heart. One asked for a reply to a previous letter and the other, the one they referred to, told me that Uncle Crawshay had died, making me his sole heir. Naturally they were anxious to proceed, as I was also sole executor. The estate comprised my old home at Trentham, which was unencumbered, reversionary interest in his own house at Stone, which was to be the property of his housekeeper during her lifetime, the Llandudno house, on which there was a small mortgage, and investments and securities of which the probate value was estimated to be about £27,000.

I remembered that the whole of my celebrated grandfather's estate had, by one accident or another, come into Uncle Crawshay's keeping, and that he, as I have tried to show, led the life of a monk. As I handed the letter to Will, I reflected with a sigh that I had always liked Uncle Crawshay, apart from his dominating my childhood, and I was grateful that the author of *Zion's Towers* should thus, through Uncle Crawshay, have spared his grandson the humiliation of playing the tune, under the name of "Don José", four times nightly on an electric guitar.

With great self-restraint Will handed the letter back to me without comment, but unthinkingly, or rather out of politeness, I made the mistake of giving it to Nancy. As she read it, her neck swelled and large salt drops fell from her eyes. Suddenly I found her weeping in my arms. Celts are very emotional, and both Will and I were embarrassed. When she had recovered a little, she began to sob: "There now, Harry boy, did I not tell you that the good are not allowed to suffer very long?"

Certain other of her remarks came back to me, and I began to regret having shown her the letter. Will, too, showed signs of perturbation as she went on: "Wasn't it providence, Harry, that sent you here? Here I am so tired of losing my sleep and now—now—it is you who can be my protector! I am glad so that it hurts my stomach. Later, perhaps, I will think that I will marry you, that I never before had such an idea. £27,000, and three houses! Harry, Harry!"

She began to cry again. Across her bowed head Will and I exchanged glances of alarm. I said: "But, Nancy, £27,000 isn't a fortune, you know. It'd need spreading out."

Will interjected: "As for marriage, he's already got a wife."

Nancy rose from her abyss of joy. "But look at us yourself, man! Has he not lived with me for eight weeks? And his wife looking for a divorce!" She turned to me. "With you, Harry boy, I would not mind if it was only £27,000. We can make boarding houses of the two places we do not live in. What do you say?"

I could not look her in the face and my eyes sank to her rosy bosom, the sight of which for the first time pained me. I had never seriously considered living with Nancy either as husband or as protector, and now that I was forced to consider the prospect, I shrank from it. After eight weeks I was already enfeebled.

In this hesitation between gratitude to Nancy and fear of her, I was astonished to hear Will say jovially: "I don't know about you, Harry, but I think this calls for a drink." He rarely drank, and disliked public houses.

Nancy said: "Indeed, yes, I will see what is in the ice-bax."

Over her head Will grimaced and shook his head. An inkling of his meaning came to me. I said: "There's a dear. Get something ready for us. I must stand Will a bubbly. Yes, and I'll bring a bottle or two back with me, if someone will lend me the money."

Will found a fiver in the shortest possible time. We had reached the lobby before a suspicion entered her guileless mind. Wrinkling her forehead, she said: "How long will you be? It is only two hours before I have a visitor."

I went back and kissed her forehead. "Ten minutes. Good, you've got a Fuller's walnut cake. Will loves them."

We had reached Vigo Street, walking swiftly, before Will asked: "You've got that letter?"

"Yes."

"What have you left in the flat?"

"Nothing much. Slippers, some underclothes and one or two unfinished scores. What are you driving at?"

"Is she good at remembering addresses? What's she know about you?"

He hailed a taxi and gave the address of the Mohocks Club. I replied: "She's got no memory for anything and she doesn't know the first thing about me, except that I turn up from time to time."

"Thank heavens for that."

"But, Will—we can't leave her flat! I mean, she's kept me for a couple of months, on top of which she's putting out tea for us. I wouldn't hurt her for worlds. She's the kindest——"

He interrupted: "Marry her then." Suddenly he snorted with laughter. "I reckon I've done pretty well everything in my life, but I've never lived on a woman's immoral earnings!"

I was hurt. "Don't put it like that."

We arrived at the club, and he conducted me to the lavatory and said: "They use carbolic soap here. Get some of the scent off you. You stink like a beanfield."

While I was rinsing myself he began to lecture me. "The trouble with you, Harry, is that you spend most of your life kidding yourself on. We all do, but you to an exceptional degree. That lady would have married you before you could turn round, and had me in bed with her while she was thinking about it. Public opinion of her kind goes by fashions—in one season they're pariahs of society and in another they're its oppressed. For some time now they've been good sorts, sentimental and generous. In actual fact they may be all these things, but primarily they are out for money. They must be. There's only one trade in the world that produces money in return for bodily communion with a shopkeeper in one hour and a murderer in the next. Could you do it? How would you like to go upstairs with a homicidal maniac? Naturally they are out for all they can get."

I was towelling my face as I protested: "But Nancy's weren't homicidal maniacs. They were civil servants, I saw them——"

He replied: "There are the hair-brushes." His big face lowered at me from the mirror. "You've just had a fortune given to you, someone stole it and I retrieved it, all within five minutes. We ought to congratulate ourselves."

I put on my jacket. "What makes you so benevolent towards me, Will?"

"I don't want to marry Marjorie, that's all."

One could never plumb the depths in him. A smile was curling the Johnsonian lips. I began to laugh; he, too. I was never so happy in my life before. He boxed me playfully with a huge fist and, still hooting with laughter, we went in to tea. Afterwards we spent almost fifty pounds of Will's money in furnishing me with new belongings. I slept the night in an hotel. Fearing perhaps that I would run back to Nancy, Will actually saw me into bed, but he need not have done so, for I slept nine hours and was roused by a maid of refreshing ugliness.

I left for the Potteries by the ten-twenty, after making Will a promise that I would faithfully do my best to remain married to Marjorie. Uncle Crawshay's affairs took some time to settle, I was in no hurry, and a year passed before I again took train to London.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I

I WAS FOND of my Trentham home and took up residence there, even sleeping in the bedroom of my boyhood. New houses besieged me and a miniature railway had been laid round the Duke's lake, but the brackened slopes of King's Ridge were the same as when I had written poetry on them. I could not live alone, and Uncle Crawshay's maid, an ageless crone who boasted that as a child she had hauled coal in a Fenton mine, did not need much cajoling to become my housekeeper. The discovery of a Daimler car jacked up in Uncle Crawshay's garage gave me the last qualification of a gentleman, except that I did not join a golf club.

The possession of money created a new attitude of mind. Even at Smith & Snelson's I had never placed it high on the list of ambitions. Now I thought less of it than ever. The sale of the Llandudno house, which contained too many bitter memories for me to like it, added to my capital. Simple arithmetic had shown me that on £500 a year, which was excessive for one who had lived five years on his debts, I could live to the age of ninety-two. Final decision was not in my hands, but I had no desire to live beyond seventy.

I found myself well known and popular, for which Uncle Crawshay's money was not wholly responsible. Mother had lived in that house for forty years, and her family, the Kenyons, at Stone for two hundred and seventy. I liked to have some old lady forgetfully refer to me as Harry Kenyon, and meet another who could tell me stories about my father's youth. Moreover, the legend had arisen that in London I had lived a Bohemian life hobnobbing with celebrities.

The popularity was useful. One evening the proprietor of the Trentham Hotel telephoned. " I say, Mist' 'Arry, there's a feller in my bar askin' a lot of funny questions abite thee. What'll I do with him ? " I told him to keep him there until I ran up in the car.

The stranger was a private enquiry agent much too apologetic for me to be cross with him. I stood him a double Scotch and learned that his name was Ernest Charles Goodwin, aged forty-two, of 29a Fortinbras Street, Pimlico, and that for eight months he had been employed by the Metropolitan Police until a lorry had run over his toes. His firm had been employed by White, Bodikins & Veitch nominally to find out what sort of life I led but actually to obtain evidence of grounds for divorce.

In return for his confidences I took him home and, with the housekeeper's help, proved the blamelessness of my life. As a remarried widower, he envied me my celibacy and went away convinced.

I did not dare to ask him whether his researches extended to Cork Street.

I had been absent from town six months when, at Will's suggestion, *Ear and Eye* proposed that I should write its weekly article of music criticism. I had met the editor at Marjorie's without knowing who he was, and Will had then commended my judgment. Apart from sending *Ear and Eye* a furious letter about a broadcast performance of Honnegger, which had not been published, I was without literary experience, but I have noticed that when a certain stage of celebrity is reached in a man, as in Will, his opinion on any subject, even on the growing of lettuces, is accepted as infallible.

One of the two reasons I accepted was that other furies had since seized me at the broadcasting of national orchestras. This necessity to put the public right in the errors and slovenliness sold to it in the name of art I understand to be the annunciation of a critic. The second reason was that the job entailed journeying through England and Wales, and I knew that were I to stay at home I should very soon find excuses for remarrying.

Half-heartedly I sent up my first article, which praised—deservedly—the choral singing of the Midlands, and was astonished to see my words printed and to receive twelve guineas for them. Invitations began to pour upon me.

What finally sent me to London was a postcard from the Mohocks : *Trouble. When are you coming up?* and the initials "W.H." I went up the next day by rail, telephoned to the Mohocks, and arranged to dine there with Will at eight o'clock.

In my pocket I had tickets of admission to various concerts, and because one of them, at the Phoenix Hall in Welbeck Street, occupied the intervening hours, I attended it. Halls such as the Phoenix are hired by ambitious artists for displaying their talent. Tickets are freely distributed to friends, the press and influential people, and the whole evening costs about fifty guineas, excluding drinks. In the present case I was informed that Livia, well-known Parisienne *diseuse*, would play her own compositions on the pianoforte and sing her settings to poems by Rimbaud and Baudelaire. As well as occupying time, I intended to show up the preciousness of such affairs against the artless singing to be heard any week-end at any chapel or drill-hall in Wednesbury or Huddersfield.

However, when I had settled myself comfortably into a back seat prepared to sneer, my feelings changed when a girl of eighteen appeared in a gown of ivory brocade cut low in the neck, spoke a few words of unaffected English and seated herself at the piano. The restraint of her compositions made me recognize Agnes Webster. There, too, when I looked for them, were the Webster hair and the flyaway Webster bearing

Without doubt it was the same child with whom I had played duets, who had dressed herself as a sultana, and who had thrown Holland's shoe into the Michaelmas daisies. But now the tide of sex had flooded her, disguising her and removing her from me. Each ripple of the brocade dress was a source of reverie and wonder. I forgave her the absurd masquerade, and even Rimbaud and Baudelaire, as one must always forgive the impertinence of youth.

After a cycle of five songs, chiefly concerned with despair and the prospect of death, I found myself clapping, critic though I was. I slipped out before the end so that she should not recognize me. In Welbeck Street rain was falling. I turned up my coat collar and walked past the dentists' waiting-rooms and suppliers of chemists' sundries, filled with grief and the old sense of wasted years. Charlotte had once been like Agnes, and I was oppressed because I found myself worshipping Agnes as I had worshipped Charlotte. The raptures rose within me fresh as ever, but because I was twice her age I might never speak of them to her without looking ridiculous.

Will was preoccupied and in no mood to comfort me for a squandered youth. I showed him the Phoenix Hall ticket and disclosed the identity of Livia. His only comment was: " Silly kid ! " Agnes had returned from Lausanne ten days before, but he had seen her only for a minute or two because he had been living at the club. Part of his surliness was due to his living at the club : he could not work there, and other members were always inveigling him to go home with them and listen to their wives and daughters playing the fiddle. The moment was not opportune for describing the emotions roused in me by a dress of ivory brocade, and I spoke no more.

The fish had arrived before Will remarked self-consciously : " I shall be going back to the hill this week-end." I offered no comment. He forced himself to say : " Marjorie moved to Stonegrove last week, taking all the children with her." I refused to help him. He exclaimed at last : " Don't you want to know why ? "

" No, why should I ? "

" She doesn't want to offend the King's Proctor."

I looked up. He added grimly : " She's divorcing you, Harry. She's found out about Cork Street."

" That damned enquiry agent ! "

" No. I told her. The enquiry agent went round afterwards and confirmed it, that's all. If it hadn't been for me——"

I was too dismayed to say anything except : " Poor Nancy ! " Then Will's dejection made me pity him. " Obviously you didn't give me away on purpose ! "

" It was pure accident. Marjorie asked me where I'd found you, and I told her. The letter from your Staffordshire solicitors had been hanging about for a couple of weeks, and it was natural that she should ask where I had found you to give it to you. I never coupled her asking with the question of divorce. Next morning she was round at Nancy's in her best bonnet, asking questions. She came back purring. Since then not only has the enquiry agent visited Nancy, but Bodikins as well."

I began to laugh. " How long did he stay ? "

Will said savagely : " For God's sake be serious ! He threatened to subpoena her. You, too. Even then he wasn't satisfied that there would be proof enough. Apparently no one saw you there."

" I always hid in the kitchen."

" It's a pity you didn't hide in the kitchen when I came. I saw you. Bodikins is going to subpoena me, as well."

I wanted to laugh again, but did not dare. I said : " Nancy'd do anything to avoid publicity. In her position she can't afford it."

" Less than ever now."

I felt more sorry than ever for Nancy. " Why ? "

" Lord Bexhill was on her visiting list. She's on the point of monopolizing him, or he her. Bexhill's father has just died and he's come into an earldom. He may even marry her. Obviously she can't afford a scandal. Bodikins says there won't be any if she'll tell the court everything."

The full seriousness of the development began to appear. I asked : " What can I do ? "

We had risen from the table and gone into the smoking-room, where coffee was served to us by a white-jacketed steward. Will mumbled : " You'd better come and see Marjorie."

" Marjorie ? She loathes the sight of me. And what for ? "

" I've given up trying to understand human nature. Now the divorce is going through she won't hear a word against you. The suit has not yet been filed, so you can still visit her."

I looked at him. " You're hoping for a last-minute reconciliation ! "

" I've given up hope. Nobody's got any sympathy for me. You forget that when you are finished with Marjorie I shall have to marry her." He hunched his shoulders in dejection. I enquired how Hope was, and he replied : " She's lost without me. I have to telephone to her every evening. I must say that I'm lost without her, too. There are times when I could kill you."

I was not afraid of him because he smiled. The thousands behind me had given me enough confidence to be unafraid of Marjorie, and we arranged to visit her the following afternoon. He praised my articles in *Ear and Eye*, and we parted on friendly terms.

My weekly article had to be with the editor in the morning and I sat down in the hotel lounge to write it, but such visions of barristers, subpoenas and court-rooms entered my head that I could not put one word after another. My chief regret was that I seemed likely to prevent Nancy from becoming a countess. At last I put my pen away and went to see her. She bore me no ill-will and, whilst no lengthy discussion took place, her kindness was such that I faithfully promised she should not suffer.

My mind was more at peace when I returned, and I sat up in bed and wrote the article without difficulty. I had wondered how to fit " Livia " into my general theory of provincial superiority, and solved the problem by describing exactly what had happened, namely, that I had come prejudiced and been won over by grace of execution. Only as I switched off the light did I wonder how far my judgment had been influenced by personal charm and the contours of a bodice, always a questionable point when judging sopranos.

2

At Stonegrove now the first-floor windows had been barred over, and through them poured the babble of childish voices one associated with the house on the hill. I used the children to cover the embarrassment of my first few minutes with Marjorie, and after a friendly pressure of her moist hand I insisted on seeing them at once. I had a horse that wagged its head for Alice and a book about trains for Rowley, besides various dolls, balls, and sweets disguised as onions and carrots for the others. The upreaching arms and the quarrels that followed enchanted me, for I had long been denied the pleasure of generosity.

There were now eight of them, and when I asked whom they belonged to Marjorie explained largely: " All my step-sisters are grown up now," and left it at that. She added: " There are four others at school. The funny thing is that I don't like looking after children and never asked to look after these." I asked where Mrs. Cusbeck was, and Marjorie replied with surprise that she thought I knew. Mrs. Cusbeck had been given the post of matron at a large children's hospital in Bombay.

Will chose to remain with the children. After all, two of them were his. I followed Marjorie downstairs in silence, and at the foot we turned with mutual exclamations:

" Harry, do forgive me this awful business of solicitors——"

" My dear, in your shoes I should have done the same, and, besides, you're a woman."

Her eyes filled with tenderness. She laid a hand on my sleeve and led me into the drawing-room. I said: "You haven't changed a bit."

"I simply had to see your Nancy. I can't believe that she's a—I mean, she's so nice, except that she's a bit naked in places. She taught me a new way to do my hair."

"So I noticed. It's charming."

"We had quite a chat. But of course that old fusspot Bodikins——! I've told him he mustn't pester her."

I was proud of her praise of Nancy. "I'm so glad you don't want her pestered. How are you going to avoid it?"

She rose impulsively. "That's just why I asked Will to bring you here. It's sweet of both of you. I did so hate that awful talk we had—I mean, with Bodikins in this room. When I got home I cried."

"I ought to be cross with you. You threw me out, and now you want to ruin the reputation of the girl who took pity on me. But, looking back, you can see that it was one of those inevitable things which were bound to happen."

She replied: "You always were a dear," and her emotions so overcame her that she leaned most of her body over me to kiss me. I was glad to make my peace with her, but at the same time I was relieved that I was divorcing her and not marrying her.

"Well, that's settled. The only question that remains is Nancy."

She rang a bell. "Don't you think Nancy is really your problem? I'm sure you will find a way out." A maid came in and Marjorie said: "We'll have tea, if you please."

I blinked my eyes. I could only spare Nancy by disclosing another liaison, and there was none to disclose. I was not the man to enjoy casual liaisons. As we walked into the next room, where Will and four of the elder children were already assembled, I began to say: "That's all very well——" but Marjorie took my arm and said:

"There now, don't let's talk about it any more. Bodikins is filing the petition this week. We must be very nice to one another, because you can't visit me afterwards, or it'll be collusion."

Marjorie insisted on our staying as long as possible, and gave me no opportunity to speak privately with Will. I knew that he was hankering to get back to his desk, but did not care to say so because this hankering of his was too well known. Our good-byes took place at the garden gate. Will, too, had been advised not to see Marjorie again until the divorce was fact, and we had the impression of machinery bearing us relentlessly on our separate ways, as at the sailing of a liner.

At the last moment, however, our parting was postponed. Will and I were outside the gate and Marjorie was leaning over it when a young girl came hurrying down from the bus-stop. She was wearing a turban of turquoise blue and a frock of the same colour secured at one hip by a huge bow with cream lining. I had to look twice before I recognized Agnes. She was no relation whatever to the child who had wanted to be a pref., or to Livia.

Will glanced at her, and for some obscure reason turned his back on her. For some other obscure reason the tender wetness in Marjorie's eyes was replaced by fury and indignation. I myself was too conscious of beauty in its most appealing shape to be able to speak. She was like Galatea. The sculptor's chisel-marks were still visible on her nose and the one ear on view, and her breath came and went with the pleasure of new experience.

She was too shy to speak. Marjorie was the first to greet her. " Where've you been to ? "

" Wimbledon."

" I haven't seen you for three days. What have you been up to ? "

" Oh "—murmurs and a fluttering of the hand—" at Mother's."

" She says she's seen nothing of you."

Agnes turned to me with a charming indulgence for Marjorie's tyranny. " Why, Harry ! How nice. I thought you were in the Midlands." We shook hands and I made some conventional answer or another. Will still had his back to her. I could not understand why the arrival of an attractive girl should create such ill-feeling.

Marjorie exclaimed: "Where did you get the money from? This outfit, for instance. I haven't seen it before."

Agnes replied nervously: "Juliet. From Juliet's shop. It's rather . . ."

I could not believe that Marjorie contained such venom. She had become a stranger. Her only excuse was that she was an elder sister. I was more glad than ever that I was to be divorced from her. My embarrassment was increased when Will unexpectedly burst out: "What's this tomfool business of yours at the Phoenix, Agnes?"

A little pinker, Agnes replied: "I didn't think you'd hear. I wanted to—that is, I didn't want to call myself Webster. They were my own . . . compositions. I thought that if the critics—and in any case it was fun. I mean——"

She could not face Holland. In one of his incomprehensible furies, made worse by knowledge of his rudeness, he exclaimed: "But what's the use! You've got to *live* before you can——" He gave up. I understood him perfectly to mean: "Art is nothing without spiritual experience. I was seventeen years getting myself heard. Here are you, a schoolgirl, hiring a hall to give a recital."

I had not intended mentioning the Phoenix Hall, but now that the secret was out I murmured: "I thought it very courageous of you, Agnes. You carried it off perfectly."

Will remarked: "Bosh!"

Agnes said: "Were you really there, Harry? I was so terrified I——"

But we were all silenced by Marjorie smacking the gate and saying: "What ever is all this about the Phoenix Hall?"

A coward would then have said that he was in a hurry and departed. It was obvious that Marjorie knew nothing of

" Livia " and the Phoenix Hall, that a full explanation must be forthcoming, and that she was preparing to loose a tempest of rage upon Agnes. Will did, in fact, make an impatient movement to be off. I opened the gate for Agnes and followed her inside, saying : " You must really let me tell Marjorie how delightful it was. But why Rimbaud ? "

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Marjorie waving good-bye to Will, and I shouted after him : " I'll phone you tomorrow." He shrugged his shoulders for answer. No further word or gesture passed between him and Agnes.

3

I had long since learned to shun the corrosion of envy, but I recognized it now in Marjorie. I was reminded of her envy of Juliet in the springtide of Juliet's engagement. Marjorie was now fifteen years older and, if there can be a superiority in excellence, Agnes was superior to Juliet in charm and youthfulness. She was, as had generally been foretold, a quintessence of Webster.

I affected not to notice Marjorie's displeasure, and described how I had arrived at the Phoenix Hall. Taking care that Marjorie heard me, I also described the sort of account I had sent in to *Ear and Eye*. In return, Agnes told me how she had sat composing before an ivy-fringed window overlooking a romantic view of meadows and mountains, and had resolved on the journey home that she would make her inventions known to the world, *toute seule*, without benefit of Webster. The whiff of her idealism was like the whiff of lilac after a hard winter. Anxious to humiliate her in every possible way, Marjorie could only ask : " But for goodness' sake, where did you get the money from ? " No real explanation was forthcoming.

I could not understand why Agnes should be visiting the house. She went upstairs to wash her feet, and subsequently sipped Russian tea through a straw, but this did not seem to be sufficient object. Her home was on the hill. Gradually I realized that she had heard that Will and I were visiting Marjorie, and had come chiefly to see us.

I daresay Marjorie had realized this on first seeing her. Agnes could give us no coherent account of Wimbledon except that her turban had been a great success and had, in fact, blocked the view for spectators three rows behind. The long June twilight was in the sky before she thought of going. I was sorry until I remembered that I might legitimately see her home. She accepted the suggestion with gladness, although Marjorie raised every objection and saw us to the door with a bitterness I had believed belonged only to Ethel and Gwennie.

Agnes preceded us down the path, and Marjorie was able to whisper in my ear: " Still able to make a fool of yourself over a girl, Harry ! "

" Why should you worry ? You're trying your hardest to divorce me."

As I hurried after Agnes I was saddened by the reflection that I should not be sorry if I never saw Marjorie again. Who would have dreamt that this termagant was the good-natured creature I had married ? And how far was I responsible for her becoming a termagant ?

It was dark under the chestnuts, and Agnes took my arm. In the bus she chattered like a schoolgirl, and I had to force myself not to look at her brilliant eyes and white teeth. Her enthusiasm roused similar enthusiasm in me. I wanted in the brief span of that summer evening to explain everything to her, not only why my marriage with Marjorie had been a failure but how the beetle found its way in the dark, and why the bus conductor got off to punch a card under a wayside clock. Fortunately we missed the last connection at Greenhill and had time in our four-mile walk home to discuss these and other things.

She said: " I think illusions are life itself, don't you ? Reality is so mean and sordid, left to itself. Do you think there are people without illusions ? I mean people like council employees, income-tax collectors and the next Conservative candidate, practical people——"

I said: "The only practical person I know is Will. He's packed with illusions."

She murmured: "Oh, Will. . . ." The name was like a sigh. "He's so tremendous that I'm terrified of him. This evening I could barely make myself join you because he was there. He's like a lighthouse. When I heard his name mentioned at Lausanne I hugged myself because I actually knew him. My stomach turned right over when I saw him. Shall I tell you something silly? If I had given my recital under my own name he'd have been bound to come, and I couldn't have borne it."

"I thought he was damned rude to you. I can't understand it. You know how courteous he is."

"I wouldn't mind if he *walked* on me." She squeezed my arm. "Everybody says you've been his closest friend. I think you've been marvellous. You've sacrificed yourself for him." I began to protest, but she insisted. "It's true though. I'll tell you how I know. Marjorie told me that you were in love with his wife. There now! I think it's heroic to give the girl you love to another man—and still love her, without telling a soul. It's your unselfishness. Why, after Marjorie had thrown you out——"

She hesitated. I asked: "Well, what happened after Marjorie had thrown me out?"

"Didn't you bury yourself in some unspeakable den in town, without saying a word to anyone? I think it was terrific."

I thought the adjective unwarranted, but I enjoyed the warmth of her arm. "Terrific?"

"Sooner than trouble anyone. I don't know how Marjorie could have. And the way Will searched you out as soon as he heard! It's Pylades and Orestes, or someone. You can't tell me that in those early days, when you were both so poor, you didn't nurse him through his defeats. Didn't you give him the inspiration for his *Night in a Drum Shop*?"

"It's legendary. Where did you get all this from?"

realized that she had heard that Will and I were visiting Marjorie, and had come chiefly to see us.

I daresay Marjorie had realized this on first seeing her. Agnes could give us no coherent account of Wimbledon except that her turban had been a great success and had, in fact, blocked the view for spectators three rows behind. The long June twilight was in the sky before she thought of going. I was sorry until I remembered that I might legitimately see her home. She accepted the suggestion with gladness, although Marjorie raised every objection and saw us to the door with a bitterness I had believed belonged only to Ethel and Gwennie.

Agnes preceded us down the path, and Marjorie was able to whisper in my ear: " Still able to make a fool of yourself over a girl, Harry ! "

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She said: "I treasure everything I hear about him. I know you'll think it childish, but it's a comfort to know that before I die I shall have known at least one great man."

I replied: "Yes, he's a great man. But don't die yet, will you?" She laughed. I asked: "What are you going to do, now you're back? You can't follow Will round, because you'll come into conflict with Marjorie."

We had arrived at the house. For the first time I saw the front door shut, but there was a light in one of the bedrooms. Agnes caught my hand. "Mummy's still awake. You can't possibly go back to town at this hour. I'll ask her if you can have Will's room."

We walked up the drive like a pair of guilty lovers, still holding hands. The hour was too magic to lose. I said: "You haven't yet told me what your plans are," and because she still made no reply I went on desperately: "Agnes, I'm married to your step-sister, but she's absolutely set on divorcing me so that she can marry Will. I'm twice your age, but I've got money of my own, and, what might appeal to you more, I'm a rising critic."

She burst out: "I can't wait. Are you really asking me to marry you?"

"Really."

She took her hand away, but only so as to look at me.

We were standing by the front door. The moon was down, but the full galaxy of stars illumined our faces. She replied: "You're a darling. I've had six proposals of marriage, all from boys or foreigners. They seemed too inexperienced." She fumbled in her bag and produced a key. "I'll go up and ask Mummy about the room. Wait here and I'll see what she says."

I snatched her fingers to kiss them, but tore my lower lip on her key-ring. Stanching the blood with my handkerchief, I stood on the threshold listening to her footsteps as they ascended the gloomy cavern of the hall, and smelling the perfume of wax polish and fresh lettuce always associated with the Websters. Somewhere, too, night-stock was flowering. Was this to be my destiny? I heard a murmur of voices and the closing of a door. She had kicked off her shoes, and was standing at my side again before I was aware of her. " Mummy says it's all right. The bed's aired." I went in and caught her hands. " I don't know anybody I'm more fond of than you, Harry——"

" Will you wait, then?"

Slowly she nodded her head. " —unless it's Will, of course. I'd marry you if only because you befriended Will."

" I can't kiss you. I've cut my lip."

In any case I felt that she was too sacred to kiss, but she inclined her head and kissed my cheek. The scent of the night-stock was overpowering. She said: " Let's go into the kitch. and see what there is to eat."

No doubt she was excited. She sat on the kitchen-table swinging her legs and gobbling cherry-cake and gooseberry-pie, in between giving descriptions of Wimbledon and Marjorie's beastliness. We agreed that mention of the engagement must be made to no one until the divorce had been made absolute. In the same ratio as I wanted to teach and protect, she wanted to learn and be sheltered. For the first five minutes she longed to make Trentham her home, if only because she was fond of riding and the fox-hounds were kennelled there, and in the next she dismissed Trentham, together with the fox-hounds, so as to go and live in Paris. I was glad that she had twelve months in which definitely to make up her mind.

When she had gone upstairs I slipped out by the back door to smoke a cigar. The light in Agnes's room was no sooner on than it was off, and I did not doubt that the child had immediately fallen asleep. I remembered that a public call-box stood a hundred yards down the road, and I strolled down to it between rows of semi-detached houses like the one Will had occupied with Charlotte.

I had known that I should find Will at his desk. I said: " It's time you knocked off for the night, Will." A grunt at the far end. I asked: "What made you so confoundedly rude to Agnes this afternoon?"

"She annoys me, a kid like that giving a public recital. And going to Wimbledon afterwards!" He looked upon a public performance as something holy, to be preceded and followed by purging and fasting.

"She thinks the world of you. I say, Will, it looks as though I shall have to give Marjorie grounds for divorce that don't involve Nancy. Otherwise she'll lose her earl. I saw her last night."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"So that you'll know why I'm going ahead with it. I'm sorry if it leaves Marjorie free to marry you."

"Go to blazes."

"Do you know of a reputable agency that does that sort of thing?"

He snorted into the mouthpiece. "As a matter of fact, I do, some people in Lincoln's Inn. There's a member here who's been divorced twice, and swears by them."

"Righto. So long as they don't blackmail me afterwards."

He promised to supply me with the agency's address, and we then rang off.

4

The same week I applied at the agency, a respectable firm that twelve months before had set up a department to arrange divorce as a side-line to the promotion of matrimony. As in other trades, the side-line had proved more profitable than the original. My affairs were taken in hand as a matter of routine. Their costs were high, but I had no complaint to make of their conduct of the case, except that the young lady with whom they sent me to Brighton ten days later was so repulsive that the judge who subsequently tried my case must infallibly have refused to believe anyone capable of misconduct with her, had he insisted upon seeing her face rather than the hotel bill.

5

In September next I went to a promenade concert with Will to hear the first performance of his Lyric Overture. There are, of course, three Lyric Overtures. I no longer try to translate into words the atmosphere inherent in a piece of music, and the music-lover must remember for himself the suppressed longing that imbues all three. Of Will's work I know nothing finer than the liberation of the oboe air in the closing passage of the third. Between them they compose a suite, although they have never yet been arranged as such.[1] The second will forever give errand boys a tune to whistle. The first, as I then heard it, gave me a hint of the quality of the symphony he was then working on—Symphony No 1, as it is humorously described.

I have given out often enough, and I here repeat, that the merit of Will's music lies in its disregard of intellectual doubts and back alleys in the statement of a simple message. That message is Will himself. With him, style is the man. You never fail to hear his music without feeling that you have always wanted to hear it—that in fact you would have composed it yourself, if a musician. This simplicity confuses the critics, who refer to him as obscure. It is true that Will puzzles me, but only because I do not understand how a nature so complex can voice such clarity. I have rarely understood him. But no one can fail to understand the humour of his music.

The opportunity had been offered him of conducting this first Lyric Overture, but he had refused. He rarely conducted, confessing that he lacked authority. We stood in raincoats near one of the doorways, and when the piece was over we turned our backs on the applause and left. Will said: "I couldn't bear to hear myself mixed up with Wagner."

Rain was falling out of the gulf above the arc-lights, and we turned up our coat collars and passed along Ridinghouse

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[1] The organisers of the Kecskemet Kodaly (1946) Festival have since apprised me that this idea occurred to them, and the three Lyric Overtures were then played as a suite under the baton of Prof. Zutler.

Street into Great Portland Street. The performance had left him with a reflex indifference. He asked, without caring: " What do you think of it ? "

" I didn't understand it. You called it ' Lyric ', but there was more defeat in it than joy. The instrumentation was perfect—you all over."

He said: " You're getting literary." But I saw that he was pleased. Suddenly he turned aside and pushed open the swing doors of a little café filled with glass-topped tables, steaming urns behind a help-yourself counter, and a dozen customers made comatose by the heat. He shook the rain off his coat and said: " This is the best possible cure for literariness."

We sat down in a corner with mugs of cocoa. He sighed at last: " Well, that's over. You were right, there *was* defeat. It's not often I get anything that can properly be called inspiration, but this was one. You'll laugh when I tell you. Do you remember when Agnes Webster walked down from the bus-stop and I was so damned offensive ? " He stirred his cocoa with a nail-file, there being no spoon, and looked up with a smile.

" Why Agnes Webster ? "

" I saw her as everything that is unobtainable. Youth, beauty, purity and so forth. The things I've never had and never shall. I only possess one way of expressing myself. Hence the Lyric Overture."

" She must have knocked you."

" I think she's——" Words failed him. At last he said: " She's so lovely I'm frightened of her. I spend most of my time at the hill avoiding her."

" She's not so remote as all that. To be frank——"

" Me, a widower with three children ! Apart from my own childhood. She'll always be one of those remote . . ."

He fell silent, and drew patterns on the steam condensed on the table's glass top. I leaned across and murmured: " Let me tell you something, Will. She cannot be so remote as you think because she has promised to marry me when the divorce is through."

His face fell into its usual immobility and he became the Will Holland of everyday, inscrutable and inarticulate. I reminded him that I had chiefly desired Marjorie's return because I had needed a wife, and that Uncle Crawshay's legacy had made the necessity urgent. He made no comment, but drank up his cocoa and very soon afterwards left. We parted at the Oxford Circus Underground amicably, but without enthusiasm.

After that I saw little of him until my divorce had been made absolute. He went back to live at the hill while I returned to Staffordshire.

Through mutual acquaintances, chiefly Agnes, Marjorie and I exchanged forgiveness for past errors and made known to one another a growing tenderness. Bodikins had refused to let us correspond, especially during the four weeks preceding the hearing. But on the morning after we received formal notice that we were no longer man and wife, I was careful to visit her at Stonegrove so as to renew the friendship that marriage had destroyed. A long and confidential chat ensued, in which I was relieved to learn that she now raised no objection to my engagement to Agnes, and that in fact she was anxious for me to marry her with all speed.

" She's so impressionable," Marjorie said. " I don't think she sees much of Will, but they live in the same house, don't they ? Agnes was always susceptible to success in a musician, particularly Will."

" Do you mean success, or ability ? "

" Either way," Marjorie replied severely, " it's not *good* for her to be continually meeting him on the landing, as no doubt she does."

" What about your engagement ? "

She looked down her nose. " It's rather soon, isn't it ! I mean, a woman has to be more careful than a man. A divorce is rather like a death, and I can't go announcing an engagement the day after the funeral!" She rose from her chair with an effort. I might have mentioned earlier that she was growing stouter. "But it's all right for you. We'll have an engagement party. Bring Agnes here, and we'll fix up all the details."

In those days Agnes was radiant. I was enslaved by her. Perhaps under pressure from Marjorie, Mrs. Webster had given her consent to the engagement. Agnes visited Trentham, and the ghosts of my boyhood were forever put to flight by her appearance in the rooms where Ethel had smacked my head and Gwennie gone through my things. In my company she went to concerts in Birmingham, Cheltenham and Cardiff. She had a creative mind and gave me glimpses of an imagination comparable with Will's. Of Will himself we saw nothing. It was coincidence that on the day Agnes and I went to Stonegrove to arrange the party for the engagement, a fortnight after the divorce, Will appeared.

That afternoon Agnes had been irrepressible, going into fits of laughter over trifles and tumbling about with the children as though she were fourteen again. In that mood she could be of no help to us, and Marjorie and I retired to the little room upstairs where she kept her bureau, ostensibly to write out a list of people to be invited, but really to enjoy a chat. The room adjoined Marjorie's bedroom and overlooked the back garden with its cedar. Four babies in winter overcoats were scrambling about the plot where I had so often idled in a deck-chair, sometimes parted in their squabbles by a nursemaid, and sometimes by Agnes.

Marjorie said: "I don't know why parents have children if they don't want them. I'm always mad when another one is planted on me, but I grow so fond of them." She looked out of the window with pride and affection. She might have been the mother of them all, but no one knew better than me that she was as near virgin as made no difference.

"What shall you do with them when you marry Will?"

"Keep them, I suppose. Juliet's in a three-roomed flat, and Louise is in Austria. I can't suddenly post their babies back to them."

"What does Will say?"

"I think we'd better get on with the list."

I felt sure that she hadn't discussed this question or any other with Will, who had kept out of her way as much as possible. We returned to the list. I wanted to exclude all those people who had known me in adversity, especially those like Billy-boy whom I had sued for help, but Marjorie pointed out that on this principle there would be few people left to ask. From the guests we proceeded to the question of catering. Marjorie left no doubt that she was anxious to give us the best possible send-off, and as quickly as possible.

We had almost finished when a new sound attracted our attention to the window. The babies had disappeared, probably to have tea. In their place were Agnes and Will, walking out of the rose-garden less self-conscious together than I had ever seen them. Marjorie would have rapped on the pane, but I prevented her. Suddenly Agnes darted towards the swing that had been hung from one of the cedar's outflung limbs. Instead of watching Agnes, I covertly watched Marjorie. She was rigid, with lips compressed and knuckles white as she leaned on them.

She exclaimed: "He never told me that he was coming."

Agnes had jumped on to the swing and Will was pushing her. I thought of the time when Will had gone skipping on the Websters' lawn and his threadbare wallet had flown out of his pocket. Agnes had flung herself back with outstretched arms, swinging herself higher and higher. I heard Will laugh. I myself watched as though destined from the beginning of time to watch some such enactment. Marjorie again attempted to call them, and I said: "Don't!"

"The swing's rotten. I've forbidden the children to play with it."

Will caught Agnes's shoulder and gave her a mighty heave. The interposition of the window gave them the appearance of actors in a screen play. Peals of laughter rang out. Agnes's toes kicked the bough. "No, no! No more!" she cried.

Will threw her higher and higher. Marjorie impulsively brushed my hand aside and had leaned over the bureau to open the window when the expected happened. A crack rang out, followed by a shriek of dismay, Agnes was tossed backwards into Will's arms, and they both disappeared with flying heels into a shrubbery of boxwood and lavender.

I sighed. Marjorie's hand dropped and her cheeks slowly crimsoned. No harm seemed to have come to them. The sound of laughter once again rose thinly to us. First Will's face appeared, and then his arms. At first we could not see Agnes because she was screened by the cedar, but we observed Will stretching out his hand to her, and then, as she rose to her feet, we saw him take her in his arms, masterfully brush back the hair tumbling across her face, and kiss her. I was amazed. I had never dreamt that Will could be so demonstrative, especially with a young girl of whom he had confessed to being afraid.

Marjorie caught her breath, and turned to open the door. I bounded from my chair and prevented her. "Where are you going?"

Almost speechless with rage, she smacked my hand away. "Didn't you see? They—they—they——!" and she flung out her arm towards the window.

I took her other hand. "Listen, Marjorie, you can't fight against the inevitable. They've been in love ever since Agnes came back from Wimbledon and she was too shy to speak to him and he was too rude to look at her."

"But if you knew, why on earth didn't you say something?"

I humped my shoulders in misery and made no reply. She jerked away my restraining hand. "As usual, you're talking like a fool. I'm going to——"

But I would not let her go. "There's more in it than that." She stared. I felt like the Ancient Mariner as I said: "I loved Charlotte, and I saw her married to him. I loved you, and you made me divorce you so that you could marry him. I loved Agnes, and now he's kissing her." I held up in admonition the hand that she had smacked. "If I were to fall in love with my own grandmother or the baker's wife, he'd have her off me. Without knowing it, Will is the instrument of an exact justice."

"Of all the nonsense I've ever heard!" Nevertheless, she hesitated. Inquisitively she asked: "Justice what for?"

"The misdeeds of my youth, when I stole *his* women from *him*. I've made a philosophy of it. Will calls it nemesis. If you'd care to listen——"

She exclaimed: "Bunkum!" and tore herself away to go running downstairs with arms bent and fists clenched, hissing like a steam-engine. From the window I saw her run onto the lawn calling: "Agnes! Agnes!" But, of course, Will and Agnes had long since disappeared. I tore up the list of guests to the engagement party. Six weeks later the two married and went to live in Paris.

A war could add little to my dejection and despair.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I

THREE months after the fighting was over I was returning to England from a cultural mission through ravaged Europe when I ran across Holland just inside the Dutch frontier, at a little junction called Woort. In those days running a railway was a matter of constant improvisation, so that we were not surprised when the overloaded train came to a halt and we were told that it would proceed no farther. I learned later that Woort, in the direct line from what remained of Münster to what remained of Rotterdam, was noted for such occurrences.

The platform and junction were soon overrun by a throng of serving-men and civilians of all nationalities, hungry for food and information. Several factors prevented the establishment of order. Coils of hose-pipe were lying about the platform, sufficiently harassing the feet without the activities of three porters, who were trying to run the coils somewhere else. A flock of homeless ragamuffins descended upon us like starlings, picking up crusts and examining scraps of paper, and importuning us for food, tobacco and the privilege of carrying our luggage. Thirdly, loudspeakers bawled at us with increasing anger, but in Dutch, supporting the theory that the Dutch had turned to painting masterpieces only because they had not been able to make themselves understood in any other way.

However, drawn up in the street outside was a mobile canteen bearing the inscription: " Presented for the Relief of Europe by the Mayor and Citizens of Fort Manakee, Wis., U.S.A." There, I thought, was civilization, and I was shuffling my way to the exit, which for some reason had been barred except for a two-foot gangway, when I caught sight of Will's unmistakable shoulders ten yards in front.

At first I was filled with excitement, but the uproar of shouts and shrieking engines prevented my attracting his attention. When at last I had struggled through I felt an unexpected reluctance to meet him. Doubtless this was through shyness, because I had my wife Becky with me, and Miriam, her ten-year-old daughter. I foresaw a great deal of explanation. My wife was the last surviving member of the Austrian house of Rosenfeldt, one-time bankers of international eminence, still very rich, the owner of a Rhenish *Schloss* in the Black Forest, countless art treasures that had escaped the rapacity of both vanquished and victors, and a unique link with the musical history of Bayreuth. But superficially she was a dumpy little woman, about ten years my senior, whom one suspected of being upheld beneath her black robes by bands of steel and whale bone, girdles, trusses and more obscure mechanisms. I was already fond of her. She spoke seldom and then only to agree with what I had said, her patience and good nature were endless, and she was especially grateful to me for having bestowed on her, as wedding-gift, a British passport.

Wars are made for the plunder they provide, and here, with gold embedded in her corsets and diamonds in the heels of her shoes, was mine.

There was no escaping Will, however. He was standing with his back to a charred window-frame, grinning at me across the hurly-burly. I crossed to him, with Becky and Miriam obediently following. We shook hands and I shouted: " Will, let me introduce you to my wife ! "

Putting his mouth to my ear he shouted back: " So you got married after all ! You must find her and join us."

It was obvious that he had not seen Becky, although she stood directly in front of us, nodding her head and twinkling behind gold-mounted spectacles. He pulled my sleeve to indicate Agnes, whom I now saw for the first time, forcing her way towards us. I was even more shy of Agnes. Her beauty had matured, for a hint of sternness lay in her eyes and her shoulders were very slightly bowed. I said diffidently: " Agnes, this is my wife," and turned to indicate Becky.

Agnes, too, failed to see her. I was embarrassed. True, people were thronging all round us, but Becky was not invisible. Agnes said: " You'll lose her in all this mob, Harry. I'm sure she's lovely. Why not join us? Those American women say there's a rest centre across the road."

Will, too, shouted something, but I didn't catch it. Agnes stood poised for a moment as I had always remembered her, with lips parted and eyes alert, before catching Will's hand and dragging him away. I noticed then that he was limping. He had lived in Paris throughout the war, and was now alternately being credited with having been grilled by the Gestapo, and accused of collaborating by writing marching songs.

I glanced round to make sure that Becky was still there, and followed Will out of the station across the road. The local

Collection Of Late Abdul Haq Burg Srinagar.

Societeit had escaped destruction, and U.N.R.R.A. was succeeding the Germans in making a rest centre out of it. A tattered poster advertising a performance of the *Egmont* overture still clung to one of the pillars. More boys were hanging about its doors. I had not realized before that they were the perennial victims of war, the orphans of Europe. Like the others, they fell upon Will and me and would not be refused until a small woman in khaki, bearing pince-nez and a row of ribbons on her chest, darted through the swing doors, when they took to their heels.

The small woman observed our advance, declared: " This is twice in one week ! " and darted back through the swing doors.

Will was following her across the threshold when he suddenly turned back as though struck by an idea. He said: " I never realized, is that your wife ? " I nodded my head. He added: " Really ? My dear fellow, I'm so sorry—— ! " For some reason he was filled with amusement. Agnes concealed her feelings. They shook hands with Becky, who nodded her head and murmured appropriate words in German. " And this ? " Will asked.

" Miriam, my step-daughter."

They shook hands with Miriam, too. A jeep tore down the road and sent us scurrying to the pavement. Will and Agnes could not conceal their smiles and curiosity. The two ladies preceded us through the swing doors, and for the few moments they were out of sight Will said: " It can't be true, Harry ! "

" It is. She's a Rosenfeldt."

He began to laugh. " You can't tell me that you take advantage of that nice old thing ! "

I was becoming annoyed. " We've only been married three days, travelling all the time."

Inside, the small woman was informing Agnes: " This is a collection centre for D.P.s and was never intended as a railway hotel. However, I can't turn you away. The next train goes through about three in the morning, but if you'll take my advice you'll wait for the ten o'clock. It's more reliable, as things go."

Agnes began to say: "My husband——" but the woman said peremptorily:

"You can have the billiard-room. Second left." She turned to me. "British?" I nodded. "But this woman ——!"

"My wife."

"Gallery. Take those stairs."

"Those people are friends of mine!"

"Gallery."

Other travellers began to arrive. I was not averse to parting from Will and took my way to the gallery.

The *Societeit* had been wonderfully organized. The tiers of gallery benches had been equipped with rough-made mattresses and blankets and many of them were already occupied by the polyglot figures of despair that have followed in the wake of armies since the days of Darius. From the well of the hall rose a melancholy tide of voices. It had been divided by hessian sacking into numbers of tiny cubicles, each of them a home, so that from the gallery rails it looked like a honeycomb. Many of the cells were empty and many more occupied by humanity and the amenities left to humanity when it has won wars—old newspapers, bundles done up with cord, and other bundles inhabited by babies.

I did not dare to give way to pity. Marjorie had told me that Agnes had given birth to a boy about the time of the Occupation. Due to some mischance of labour, the child had suffered a cerebral hæmorrhage which had resulted in a paralysis of the hips and legs. It had also been subject to spasmodic convulsions, and, according to the doctor who attended it, had suffered a perpetual headache for its five months of life.

I remembered the little hooligans at the station and the others hanging about the doors of the centre, and let my eyes settle upon only one cubicle, in which a woman was tying a bandage round the leg of a whimpering girl. The aggregate

Societeit had escaped destruction, and U.N.R.R.A. was succeeding the Germans in making a rest centre out of it. A tattered poster advertising a performance of the *Egmont* overture still clung to one of the pillars. More boys were hanging about its doors. I had not realized before that they were the perennial victims of war, the orphans of Europe. Like the others, they fell upon Will and me and would not be refused until a small woman in khaki, bearing pince-nez and a row of ribbons on her chest, darted through the swing doors, when they took to their heels.

The small woman observed our advance, declared : " This is twice in one week ! " and darted back through the swing doors.

Will was following her across the threshold when he suddenly turned back as though struck by an idea. He said: " I never realized, is that your wife ? " I nodded my head. He added : " Really ? My dear fellow, I'm so sorry—— ! " For some reason he was filled with amusement. Agnes concealed her feelings. They shook hands with Becky, who nodded her head and murmured appropriate words in German. " And this ? " Will asked.

" Miriam, my step-daughter."

They shook hands with Miriam, too. A jeep tore down the road and sent us scurrying to the pavement. Will and Agnes could not conceal their smiles and curiosity. The two ladies preceded us through the swing doors, and for the few moments they were out of sight Will said : " It can't be true, Harry ! "

" It is. She's a Rosenfeldt."

He began to laugh. " You can't tell me that you take advantage of that nice old thing ! "

I was becoming annoyed. " We've only been married three days, travelling all the time."

Inside, the small woman was informing Agnes : " This is a collection centre for D.P.s and was never intended as a railway hotel. However, I can't turn you away. The next train goes through about three in the morning, but if you'll take my advice you'll wait for the ten o'clock. It's more reliable, as things go."

Agnes began to say: "My husband——" but the woman said peremptorily:

"You can have the billiard-room. Second left." She turned to me. "British?" I nodded. "But this woman ——!"

"My wife."

"Gallery. Take those stairs."

"Those people are friends of mine!"

"Gallery."

Other travellers began to arrive. I was not averse to parting from Will and took my way to the gallery.

The *Societeit* had been wonderfully organized. The tiers of gallery benches had been equipped with rough-made mattresses and blankets and many of them were already occupied by the polyglot figures of despair that have followed in the wake of armies since the days of Darius. From the well of the hall rose a melancholy tide of voices. It had been divided by hessian sacking into numbers of tiny cubicles, each of them a home, so that from the gallery rails it looked like a honeycomb. Many of the cells were empty and many more occupied by humanity and the amenities left to humanity when it has won wars—old newspapers, bundles done up with cord, and other bundles inhabited by babies.

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I remembered the little hooligans at the station and the others hanging about the doors of the centre, and let my eyes settle upon only one cubicle, in which a woman was tying a bandage round the leg of a whimpering girl. The aggregate in human suffering was too great to contemplate. I could weep for a gashed leg and perhaps comprehend a little of Agnes's grief, but the rest belonged to God.

2

Becky was contentedly making a nest for herself on the lowest bench, and, I had no doubt, would presently fall asleep. This woman who had been reared in unimaginable luxury and took two hours to attire herself could endure endless discomfort and at the end of it fall asleep like a child. Miriam was undressing a doll. I kissed them both and promised to find food. They accepted the kiss and the prospect of supper as they had accepted my adoption of them, with equanimity.

Downstairs I found a cafeteria filled with three distinct flavours of unwashed bodies, carbolic and onion-soup. Apathetic humanity with labels on them queued with purposeful travellers at a broad semi-circular counter for soup, corned-beef roll and an allotment of two Lucky Strikes each. Among them were Will and Agnes. The boys had now been admitted and were seated at two long benches with bowls of soup before them, chattering but cowed by the presence of the little woman with the service ribbons. I, too, was terrified of her. I was not surprised to learn that she was Lady Aelfrida someone, and owned huge estates in Yorkshire. Her type of my country's genius was to be found everywhere in the world, regarding suffering as bad taste and defying wars by force of egotism.

Food might not be taken from the cafeteria, and I was forced to fetch Miriam. Becky was already asleep. We joined Will and Agnes at a small table in one corner, where Miriam's docility and excellent manners began to impress. I described how a French Colonel of *Chasseurs* had been so taken by her provocative little face looking at him through the carriage window that he had his luggage transferred to our compartment and then discovered that she was only ten. Will laughed and Miriam pouted. I began to enlarge upon the wealth and power of the

Rosenfeldt family, which was now all concentrated upon my wife and the child at my side.

Will said: " You are to be congratulated—that is, if you are still under the illusion that money is desirable. I thought that as a theory of living it was old-fashioned." I could not make out whether or not he was chaffing. He was certainly as obscure as ever. He went on: " The trouble with life is that you always get what you want. I'm scared of asking for anything in case I get it."

At this point he spilt his coffee over the table, and I was glad. Everything I said was a mockery to him, as though since our last parting, six years before, he had come to look upon me as a figure of fun. I was now forty-five years of age, married, and a man of wealth, and I resented being taken for a Punchinello.

When I told him that I was engaged in discovering musical talent in the Army of Occupation he laughed immoderately, saying that talent discovered itself, and his laughter increased when I told him that I was employed by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. He exclaimed: " There now, Harry, you've got even greater scope for your destructive powers than when you were a critic. But then I don't believe there is such a body. It's too like Gilbert & Sullivan."

I replied with dignity: " I still am a critic. What do you mean ? "

" The last thing music and the arts want is encouragement. All they ask is decently to be allowed to starve. Imagine Rimbaud or Van Gogh being encouraged! I daresay your council is just another of those concerns that sets out supported by the nation's millions to sponsor works of genius, and ends up like the B.B.C. as an asylum for all those who've failed to produce anything themselves."

The conceit so amused him that he spluttered coffee, and Agnes said: " Will, please don't start talking about the B.B.C. You know you won't sleep."

Collection Of Late Abdul Haq Buro Srinagar.

I remembered Charlotte saying the same thing, and replied coldly: " Say what you like, but during the war we were broadcasting to twenty-seven countries——"

Will leaned forward earnestly. " True. I was talking to a Dutchman in the train about broadcasting. He told me that during the Occupation his countrymen started to wear match-sticks in their button-holes as a sign of resistance, when some hero in a Portland Place basement began to applaud them, bidding all true subjects of Her Majesty wear match-sticks. The result was that next morning the Germans found this Dutchman's brother and two of the neighbours wearing match-sticks, and shot them."

I began to busy myself with Miriam, who was growing restless. I felt that Will was deliberately taking a wrong-headed view so as to ridicule me. The self-sacrifice of those who had forsaken home and country so as to serve them better with the B.B.C. could not accurately be described. By chance, Agnes's hand touched mine, and our eyes met. For a second I forgot Becky in the recollection that but for Will I should have married Agnes. Agnes said gently: " Shall I take her to her mother? I think she's a dear little girl."

We watched the two of them walk hand in hand through the polyglot crowd and disappear. I leaned across to murmur: " Will, how did you get that leg of yours? It was the Gestapo, wasn't it?"

He began to splutter again. It was unforgivable. There are some things too sacred to splutter about. He said: " Make no mistake, it was my own fault. I got kicked by a carthorse in the Rue Lepic. I've been offered the Legion of Honour for this leg of mine. Anyone else would have taken it."

I insisted: " But you were picked up, weren't you? In London, everyone who knew you buzzes with rumours."

" The Gestapo and I exchanged one or two polite conversations. They were practical people and appreciated my point of view. Our association ended with Agnes receiving the best medical attention and an extra half-pint of milk a day."

" But what was your point of view ? "

He chaffed me : " Who should know better than you ? After the Germans had gone, the Americans asked me the same question. Tomorrow it'll be the Russians or the Chinese, or someone. The answer will always be that I write music." He would say no more on the subject, although I pressed him.

It was true, he said, that he had written a marching song for the conquerors, called *Rhine, Mother of Rivers*. Only when someone discovered that it was an almost literal rendering of *Old Father Thames* was it discarded.

Of collaboration he said : " Witch-hunts aren't in it, but the fact is that if a German soldier knocked at your door and asked for a glass of water you gave it to him. That is, unless you were a born fool."

Now that his audience had left, he had become more reasonable and we talked for a couple of hours. The celebrity he had attained after eighteen years of obscurity had given him a profound scepticism, without taking away any of his native good humour and optimism. He was on his way to confer with British-Emmanuels in a film portraying Europe liberated. It was I who gave him the idea that Europe liberated lay around him, in the rest centre.

He questioned me closely about the people at home. I had left Marjorie in charge of nineteen children, if not more. Hope sat in the back room of a bank evacuated to Bath, checking paying-in slips against amounts called out to her by a good-looking fellow two or three years her junior. The " Webster Sundays " had long since been discontinued, Mrs. Webster had died, and Juliet's shop had been blown to smithereens.

We rose to go, agreeing to meet again on the morrow and travel together by the ten o'clock train to Rotterdam. The time was past eleven. He took my arm, not so much out of friendship as because he needed the support. He said : " Seriously, Harry, you're a lucky fellow marrying this Rosenfeldt woman. I envy you. The war's left me damnably short of money."

They were almost his last words before we parted, he to the billiard-room and Agnes, I to the gallery and Becky.

I lay down, but sleep would not come. My long association with Will passed like a procession before the mind's eye. Memories of Charlotte were never far from me. He had married her, and taken Marjorie from me, too, and Agnes. I placed my hand affectionately on Becky's rump as she lay sleeping. At least he would permit me to keep her, although I had not liked his confessing that he envied me my marriage, after his mockery of it.

I rose and went into the corridor, stepping over bodies to do so, but found more bodies there and went downstairs. The smell was such that I lighted one of my Lucky Strikes, and cupped it in my hand because I was afraid the Lady Aelfrida would object. Loose thoughts tossed about in my brain. Will's scepticism was that of the age, which had survived unparalleled slaughter by chemicals and explosives only to become fascinated by the means for even greater, and perhaps final, destruction. All the delights and abominations that had haunted the imagination since Moses had warned mankind against them, Will had experienced. Nothing remained. Yet I had no doubt that stirring in his mind was some reassuring harmony born of these things.

As I had feared, Lady Aelfrida darted through a swing door, whispered a command to put my cigarette out, and darted back again. I wandered upstairs, regretting the feeling of guilt that Ethel and Gwennie had implanted in me. Will had again referred to my destructive powers. I knew that in the small hours the mind is never realistic, but for various reasons I felt miserable enough to cry.

A surprise awaited me. (Yet had I not feared it from the moment of my meeting Will?) Will himself had taken my place beside Becky and was conversing with her in low tones, in German. Both were freely smoking cigarettes.

As I drew near Will raised his head. I recognized his look of internal excitement. He said: " You never told me, Harry, that her father put up some of the money for Wagner at Bayreuth, and she knew Saint-Saëns and has met Brahms."

I had nothing to say and sat apart from them in desolation, not daring to light a cigarette for myself. I knew very little German and could not therefore understand what they were talking about. After ten minutes Will rose and turned to me. "Harry, you've won a treasure. She'll be of the utmost use to you. Apart from which, she's so sensible. Quaint sense of humour, too. Perhaps that explains why she married you." He stretched himself. "Lucky we met. We can all travel back together. You must have lots to talk about with Agnes."

We arranged to foregather in the cafeteria in good time for the ten o'clock train, after which he accorded Becky a bow, and departed. Becky leaned forward to tap my hand and express her pleasure at meeting so courteous and talented a gentleman, who was also, she had learned, my oldest friend.

My misery deepened. Becky was settling off again when I impulsively leaned over to whisper in her ear that I found it imperative to catch the three o'clock train instead of waiting for morning. It was either that, I said, or going back to Germany. She was a little cross at first, but after a yawn or two went to collect her things. Miriam was still fast asleep as I carried her downstairs and across the road to the station.

We were rattling gingerly on our way when the grey light appeared that precedes the dawn. I discerned round us the stark ruins of a blitzed town. Becky asked me why I laughed, but I did not reply. A great many people don't understand laughter. Then I shuddered with an internal chill, and sneezed.